THE HONEY-STAR

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THE HONEY-STAR

A NOVEL

By TICKNER EDWARDES

Author of "The Lore of the Honey Bee"

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THE HONEY-STAR

CHAPTER I

AT THE SIGN OF "THE FIVE SHEARERS"

"'TIS warm enough o' day-time," said Mrs. Lorrie to the parlour-company generally, "but o' nights—well, a stick or two burnin' 'ull huck nobody's boanes."

Mrs. Lorrie sat in her comfortable bar in the "Five Shearers" inn at Whinbury, her knitting-needles flashing in the red sunset light. To all appearances there were few in the company inclined to disagree from her proposition. Though it was April, and the keen north-east wind had had little power for mischief while the sun rode high, the evening had fallen chilly, with a promise of frost before the morrow's dawn. From the wide, old-fashioned fire-place the beech-logs sent forth a cheery glow, and every man stretched his legs to them willingly enough. Mrs. Lorrie looked round the fireside circle until her eyes rested on the seat in the chimney-corner—the only seat vacant amidst the throng. Her grey ringlets trembled a little over the hafts of her silver spectacles.

"Pore Caleb!" said she, looking from one to the other of the rough-hewn, kindly faces before her—faces still full of a grave echo of the day's event; "'tis ernful to

think o' th' ould bee-maaster laid to rest at laast out there i' th' litten—him as has fair wore a place fer hisself there on the corner-bench amongst us all. An' now th' ould Whinbury beeves 'ull go th' same road, I reckons; an' Maast' Laughton a'll have his wicked way at laast. Whatsay, Maast' Peavey?"

The little man in black—wedged into the old oak settle between brawny Joe Fladgate, the blacksmith, and the wheelwright, thunderous-voiced Amos Dawes—had said nothing. He had merely shaken his white head. But now, finding all eyes upon him, he became ceremoniously articulate.

"Come, come, Mrs. Lorrie! 'Tis a strong wured, as ye'll own. An' 'im a gentleman born an' bred, or I never seed wan. Ould Caleb, a good man, mind ye, as ever drawed breath; but ne'er a wan here as 'ull deny 'a wur crotchetty time an' agen, not to say onreasonable when 'twur other folk as kep' bees to consider. Set up a stall or two, an' ye wur Caleb March's henemy—'twur allers so i' th' ould days afore Maast' Laughton come. But a stranger, as 'a wur then; an' him now wi' a hunnerd an' twenty! Na, na, neighbours all! Clerk to this parish I ha' been more'n thirty year, as ye knaws well; an' I'll not deny there be a power o' wickedness among ye. But, like as not, th' very Archangel, if 'a set up bee-stalls i' Whinbury, 'ud soon have found hisself foul o' pore Caleb March!"

It was growing dusk, and Mrs. Lorrie came out of her snug retreat for a moment to light the candles.

"But look ye, Maast' Peavey," said she. "Bee-pots is bee-pots, as Gorramighty made 'em adunnamany ages agone. I'm not fer sayin' as Caleb woudna' ha' fallen out wi' Maast' Laughton, even if 'a'd kep' th' pore critters i' th' best o' straw. But they gurt ugly boxes, wi' th' patent insides as lifts out like crazy-puzzles!—'tis

fair goin' agen Providence. Let aloane as 'a be a mystery, comin' from nowheres, an' never a wured o' his consarns to a livin' soul o' us sin' 'a lit along to Whinbury these ten years ago."

And this, as Mrs. Lorrie perhaps intended it should, brought up sudden reinforcements to the old clerk's side. A long, lean young man, who had been squaring his brown velveteen elbows on the table by the window and absent-mindedly gazing out on the twinkling village-lights, wheeled round now with a great scroop of heavy boots on the sanded floor.

"Widder Lorrie!" said he, exaggerated reproach in his voice, but a glint of mirth in his deep-set blue eyes, "y'are fiddlin' th' ould tune agen, be ye? Lorsh! these yere wimmin! Forgive a man all, they will; all but th' wan mortal sin. Maast' Laughton, just because 'a's a pore bachelor-man, 'a's fit fer naun but——"

Mrs. Lorrie warmed visibly.

"An' a real purty pair o' ye, there be, George Lindup! I might ha' knowed as ye'd stand up fer'n; an' so eether on ye 'ud do, if tother wur wuss than Cain an' Judas rolled into wan. Wimmin indeed! But there! Sakes alive! Bachelors—they knows naun o' wimmin's value i' life. Like blind men, they be, as caan't onderstand why folks loves the sun to shine!"

From its nook under the glowing log the boot gave out a warning sizzle. It was Joe's ale hotting, and he reached for it with something very like a sigh.

"Ay! I knows all about that, Joe Fladgate!" exclaimed Mrs. Lorrie, as though he had spoken his thoughts aloud. "Ne'er a 'ooman breathin' as warn't human; an' that be as good as to say ye must take foul weather wi' fair i' married life. 'To have and to hould!'—I mind well the day ye said it, Joe; an' if ever a man spoke up arnest-like——"

Joe handed on the boot to his next neighbour, a whimsical self-commiseration moist in his big grey eye.

"Seven year, come Milemas!" he remonstrated, as though that made all the difference in the world. "Leave aloane as she said it too, Mrs. Lorrie, as ye'll never deny. But Lor! let's be happy—all this long while from closin'-time! An' Maast' Laughton, 'a bean't no real bachelor, I reckon; leastways, not out-an'-out like."

Mrs. Lorrie stopped the play of her knitting-needles a moment to peer at Joe doubtfully.

"What! A man as lives all by his lone lonesome, an' fends an' fothers fer hisself—ay! an' ha' done these ten years, certain-sure, to all our knowin'?"

The burly blacksmith looked at her in good-humoured defiance.

"Ah! surelye!" he maintained stoutly. "Pore George Lindup here, as never gied look or kind wured to maid sin' 'a's ould faather died i' debt—'tis different-like wi' un. But Maast' Laughton! Heough! neighbours! We all on us knows one pair o' bright eyes, doan't us? Ah! an', maybe, two!"

Joe realised his indiscretion the moment the words had escaped his lips. A silence fell on the company, during which all eyes focussed themselves secretly on an ancient man in a round-frock, who sat placidly smoking and staring at the fire. Joe's own anxious glance now travelled in the same direction, but the old man puffed steadily on, oblivious of the common scrutiny.

"'A be gettin' harder o' hearin' every day," whispered Mrs. Lorrie reassuringly. "'A caan't abear to think o' naun less than a dook or a faarmer fer Miss Rose; an' 'tis lucky fer ye, Joe, as ye chaws ye wureds a bit, or 'a'd a sot about ye middlin', I warrant. 'Tis trew, bean't ut, shepherd?"

Her voice, shrilled up to the pitch of his dull ears, brought the old man out of his dreams with a start. He looked round at the landlady with a quick, shrewd smile cresting up over the wrinkles of his face, like the morning sun across new-turned furrows.

"'Tis Joe Fladgate!" shouted Mrs. Lorrie genially. "'A wur arstin' ye when y'are goin' to feed-off th' rye-grass up by Tovet Corner."

The old shepherd was so long in his rejoinder, that she began to think his ears again at fault. But at length he answered her.

"Oo, ay, now!" said he, with a glance at Joe of mingled contempt and amusement. "Th' like o' that, now! An' ony jest this foldin'-time th' young faarmer, 'a said, sez he, 'Shepherd, that there Tovet piece be getten up middlin'' 'a sez, 'an' why not start feedin' un i' th' marnin'; an' set th' lamb-creeps,' sez he, an'—— Lorsh! 'a knaws naun o' shepherd-work—Maast' Tom! 'Tis all 'arses wi' un. Nor you neether, Joe, as is allers ready to larn folks their trade better'n theirsels knows it."

Mrs. Lorrie, keeping her usual keen look-out for signals of danger to the harmonious progress of her company, now detected an unmistakable one in Joe Fladgate's eye. Casting about for a change of subject, and at a loss for a fresh issue, she now harked back on the prevailing sad topic of the day.

"Ah! now," said she. "But these yere Whinbury beeves—what 'ull come on 'em, think ye, shepherd, now as th' ould bee-maaster be dead an' gone? Mistus March 'a'll never be able to keep 'em on, what wi' her wind-break, to say nought o' th' size o' her. An' as fer 'Lisbel——"

"'Lisbel, did ye say, Mrs. Lorrie?"

The young man in the velveteen coat by the window

had been star-gazing again. But at the sound of the name, he turned quickly. Mrs. Lorrie smiled.

"Ay! 'Lisbel, George. But th' wimmin, they doan't count i' beeve-work. Let aloane as th' gell be goin' off agen by th' Stavisham carrier to-morrer, right away through up-country back to her sittivation i' Marshminster. Ah! an' a rare job 'a had o' it, jest to get th' two days off fer th' funeral, as I be tould."

George Lindup stopped, and slowly knocked out his pipe on his gaiter. When he looked up at last, a bright flush shone under the tan of his cheek. Mrs. Lorrie's smile broadened.

"No," said George, with well-simulated unconcern, and meeting her eyes steadily. "No, no! 'Tis trew, Mrs. Lorrie. Wimmin-folk as is used to a man about th' place, they be all at sea when—— But goin' away agen, did ye say? An' to-morrer?"

"'Tis right enow, George," observed Peavey. "I heerd it from Mistus March her own sel'. These yere big shops i' th' gurt towns as deals i' ladies' finery, they be allers goin' ding-dong from morn to night, an' scarce a minnit to breathe fer anyone. Fashion takes no account o' buryin's. But what a young gell warnts fer to leave a comfortable hoame i' th' country, an' goo to be nigger-druv i' town-smoake an' clash an' dust, I *caan't* think!"

Peavey, in addition to being parish-clerk and sexton, kept also the village grocery and drapery shop, and his opinion of business life out in the great world was received with the respect due to a professional. There was a general murmur of approbation.

"Fegs! nor caan't I, neether!" roared Amos Dawes from the depths of his quart-measure. "If ever gell o' mine took sech a idee into her noodle-head, why, I'd—— Ah! see if I wudn't!"

The fierce frown which he tried to conjure up into his

jolly, good-humoured face, smothered round with its shock-hair and shaggy beard and whisker, was gone in a moment.

"An' my wured! Mrs. Lorrie!" he went on, softly and tenderly now as any boy in his teens, "did ever ye see a maid so changed out o' all knowledge? Scarce three year sin' 'a went away; an there 'a be, growed up a futt or more, an' filled out, an' sech a purty face as 'ud knock th' Pope o' Rome hisself all o' a heap. Little 'Lisbel March? 'Lisbel, as many a time I ha' shoulder-ridden, an' lolly-popped, an' Lor' knows what all? Gorm! why I'd ha' passed her by to-day fer a stranger if 'a hadn't putt out her haand to me, an' sez she, real haffable an' friendly-like, 'Amos,' sez th' purty baggage, 'doan't say as ye're too proud to——'"

A sudden exclamation from Mrs. Lorrie brought him here to a stop. She put up a quick hand for silence. In the stillness that now fell upon the room, all heard the far-off clatter of a horse's hoofs coming along the road which led from the neighbouring market-town. Mrs. Lorrie pursed up her chin significantly, as she went on with her knitting.

"'Tis Maast' Tom," said she. "None but wild Tom Petherway 'ud risk a good horse, an' 'a's own neck, gallopin' arter dark like that'n. Lorsh! how 'a be ridin'! Th' ould faarmer, 'a need to make faarmin' pay, when 'a's got a son as—— Here 'a comes, pell-mell, hard as ever, I do declare; though there be folk, little chillern belike, i' th' street, an'—— Lor' save us, George! what be th' matter?"

For George Lindup, who had been flattening his face upon the window-glass to see young Tom storm by in the darkness, had turned with a shout of surprise. He seized the lantern from its hook on the beam, and made for the door post-haste.

"Coom along, Joe! Coom along, Amos! 'Tis Maast'

Tom's mare sure enow, but never a rider! Tom's on th' road somewheres atween this an' Stavisham, an' there 'a'll bide till we finds 'un!"

The three men had proceeded about a couple of miles down the winding, tree-shadowed lane, carefully reconnoitring the way as they went, when they found themselves drawing within the zone of a clear, yet still distant harmony. They stopped to listen.

"'Tis Maast' Tom, sure enow!" decided George Lindup, after a moment's strained attention. "An' purty merry, 'a be, by th' sound o' it. No boanes broke, neighbours, this time, I reckons. But coom along; belike 'a'll be glad o' company hoame'ard."

Much relieved at the evidently mirthful nature of the melody, disjointed and confused though it was, the trio pushed forward at top speed; and soon came upon a dark figure sitting erect in the centre of the highway. As they stopped before it, the song ceased, giving place to a ripple of suppressed laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! You good people! Well met! I'm not sure, but I think Gipsy and I have parted company. That you, Joe? Just look about, will you, and see if you can find her. What! and Amos too? And who's the man with the glim? Turn it out of my eyes, George, there's a good fellow!"

"Gipsy, 'a be hoame this half-hour, sir," said George Lindup, helping the young man to rise. "'A coom through th' village top-tilt wi'out 'a's maaster; an' we 'lowed as we'd goo an' look fer 'un. Not taken no hurt, sir, I do hope?"

Tom Petherway—swaying a little from side to side, his brown riding-boots planted well apart, and one canary-gloved hand twirling at a moustache of much the same hue—turned a merry glance from one to the other of his companions.

"Hurt? Oh, dear no! Just a few of the old spots, you know, that's all. Go easy, Amos!"

Amos Dawes was vigorously grooming the young man on one side, and Joe Fladgate was performing the same friendly office on the other. Between them they soon had his faultlessly-cut check riding-suit free of dust, had recovered his cap and hunting-crop from the road-side nettles, and now, each taking an arm, proceeded to manœuvre him in the direction of the village, George Lindup striding on ahead with the light. Tom treated the affair as an excellent joke. For the whole way he kept up a running fire of talk, save when fits of uncontrollable merriment rendered speech impossible.

"Roper—you don't know Roper, Joe?—charming fellow, stopping at the 'Oak' in Stavisham—he bet me a level crown I'd never stick on a mile; and he's lost, by Jove! Ha, ha, ha! What a grip you've got, Amos! Slack a bit, will you?"

"Ah! that there 'Hoak,'" muttered George Lindup to himself as he marched along at the head of the party. "There's amany i' this countryside as 'ud be glad if t'wur at th' bottom o' th' hocean."

"It would be nicer," went on Tom Petherway more gaily than ever, "much nicer if you two could agree as to what pace to go. At present Amos seems to be for two miles an hour, and you, Joe, for about twenty. Why, you'll pull—you'll pull me in halves directly."

He was so overcome by the humour of the idea that the entire cavalcade was compelled to stop, while he had his laugh out. This happened several times more ere they passed the village. But at last, by a crafty blend of persuasion and compulsion, they got him safely down the side-lane and inside the great stable-gates of Whinbury Farm; watching him through the bars until they saw him enter the lighted harness-room, where they

knew he would find the right sort of discreet assistance towards the private stair and his bed.

The three friends tramped back to the village together. It was late, far too late to think of returning to the "Five Shearers" that night, and they made a common move towards home. Amos Dawes was soon left at his cottage. Joe's little ivy-smothered dwelling lay hard by the forge on the far side of the green, and George Lindup lived a little way beyond.

At his garden-gate Joe paused, surveying the open door of his cottage, and the light in its kitchen, with a melancholy foreboding.

"She be hup!" he muttered, at once wrathfully and timorously. He took an indecisive step or two up the path, then turned back again.

"George," he whispered, "I ha' just thought on't. Din't ye say as that there grindstone o' yourn had bruk its axle? Well, 'tis airly yet, an' I could come around this minnit, an' measure up, an'——"

George Lindup smiled under cover of the darkness.

"'Tis over agin th' hinrip," said he, "we'd sot 'em all cacklin' hurly-bulloo, an' wake every soul i' Whinbury. Na, na, Joe; better let 'un bide till mornin'! Goo'-night to ye!"

Joe Fladgate lingered until the last echo of his friend's footsteps had died away in the night. And then, with a sudden accession of desperate courage, he faced about to his door.

CHAPTER II

ELISABEL'S RESOLVE

THOUGH the weather-vane on Whinbury church-tower right at the top of the green, caught almost the earliest beams of morning, it was a full half-hour before the lifting sun had breasted Whinbury Down, and driven the last lingering blue shadow of the night from the village-streets.

Close under the foot of the hill ran Whinbourne river, and the village lay clustered upon either bank, with the old stone bridge in its midst. From the steep crest of this bridge, looking south-westward down the shining water-way, you could see the roofs of Stavisham market-town huddled together in the valley seven miles off; and on clear days, from the top of the hill, the slender grey cathedral spire of Marshminster was just discernible on the far horizon, cutting the line of glittering sea beyond.

Where the ancient thatched cottage, that had belonged to Caleb March's family from time immemorial, stood behind its barberry hedge at the crook of the village-street, the zone of sunlight had already descended, although it was barely six o'clock; and the level amber beams were pouring into the old bee-garden, rousing the hives to the work of another thronging April day.

Elisabel March came down the red-tiled winding path,

her black skirts brushing the dew from the forget-me-nots as she went. She moved slowly, stopping to look about her now and then, as one will do who has but just returned to the old loved home-spot after an absence of years. There was nothing changed, nothing at all—she thought, as she wandered towards the orchard-plot down by the riverside where most of the bees were kept, noting how the old-fashioned hives of straw were still dotted about here, there and everywhere in the glowing wilderness of the place, just as her father always loved to have them. Nothing? A hard hot lump came in her throat as she remembered what she had stolen so early from her bed to do. On every hive, amidst the bright-hued flowers of the spring, there fluttered a little sombre streamer of crêpe. Quickly, feverishly now, Elisabel passed from one to the other, snatching off their black trappings, until she reached the end of the orchard, and paused for breath under the great plum-tree that overhung the water, her head well up in the white shadow of its blossom.

Strangely out of place she looked in her town-made mourning clothes—strangely at odds with all the colour and scent and ringing music of the April morning, as she stood erect and motionless for a while, her lips parted, her eyes roving over the green sunny vista of wooded hill and dale until they rested on the smoke of far-off Stavisham, dimming the blue wall of the southern sky.

A black gown was no new thing in Elisabel's life. Since, in a fit of sixteen-year-old petulance, she had answered the advertisement of Dexter and Lumby, the Marshminster drapers, and had gone to serve her apprenticeship with those astute, palm-polishing tradesmen, she had seldom worn anything else. But her dress had never felt black until yesterday, when she had stood at her father's graveside, summoned thither so hastily, so unexpectedly.

And to-day, when in an hour or two the carrier's cart would call for her, to hurry her back to the work she had grown to hate, yet to which pride had held her for three long years with such make-believe of contented diligence—to-day, in the sweet pure light of early morning, here in her native place that she loved so well, Elisabel March felt black and sorrowful through to the core.

Grave moments alone revealed the true Elisabel now to those about her. While she was merry and busy, her companions in the great crowded Marshminster shop had little chance of getting more than a fleeting, and therefore a false, conception of her. She laughed on the smallest pretext, sang softly to herself, posed, dashed about at her work. Whole days and weeks spent close in her company left her black-robed or black-coated fellow-prisoners with no more than an impressionist picture of this once raw village-girl; a picture favourable enough, yet all of broad, detailless touches, as one conceives of a passing butterfly—a spot of changing colour that dazzles and is gone.

But now, as she stood alone under the canopy of plum-blossom at the water's edge, her tall, lithe, graceful figure motionless in the sunshine, her thoughts all sorrowfully adrift in the new world of trouble that had dawned for her and those she loved, the true Elisabel March was plain enough, if there had been eyes to see.

A dark abundance of hair, so dark that it looked almost coal-black against the wealth of white blossom; a strong, pale face, yet healthy in its pallor, and comely in its delicate strength; eyes of so deep, so sombre a blue that the full sunlight could scarce reveal their colour; lips that could set firm and straight together in one clear-cut line, or wreathe apart all hesitant, coral-red tenderness—you might have laughed and chaffed with the girl a score of times, and yet never have realised how the merry

talk, the careless, dash-about company-mood that she invariably presented to all strangers alike, had blinded you to her true type; the true Elisabel, built—as some sour, stern philosopher spying upon her here in her orchard solitude might aver—to labour and suffer and uphold, rather than help whip up the rainbow-froth of human gaiety.

Elisabel March looked down at what she held in her hand, and laughed. It was a laugh with a sob in it. The two-score or so of black crêpe tags that she had gathered from the beehives had grouped themselves between her fingers into a grotesque resemblance to a bouquet of flowers. A bridal bouquet, and she a black bride at the waterside, waiting on the shores of Lethe for Charon to take her over to a shadowy wedding—Elisabel had never heard the old myth, and so could not humour its application. But she shed her gruesome burthen hastily, cast the black rags upon the gliding stream, and stood watching them until they disappeared in distant glittering eddies. And then she fell to pacing to and fro on the green, daisy-gemmed sward of the bank, and set herself resolutely to think.

Here she was, at the end of her two days' furlough so grudgingly bestowed; and a few hours would see her back again at her work in the dusty, clamorous High Street of Marshminster. Her own future subsistence was assured, her well-being almost inevitable, as things went, and the world understood well-being. But what of her mother and her bedridden sister, who, now that old Caleb March was gone, were left to fend for themselves as best they might? While the old bee-master lived, and could ply his trade—work at the skep-making and take the produce of his hives to Stavisham in the little donkey-cart on the weekly market-days—Elisabel knew that there had been enough for those at home, eked out

by what her mother had earned at her laundering. But all that was altered now. Whinbury beeves would have to pass into other hands, with no one there who knew how to care for them. Perhaps even the old home itself might be broken up; for her mother was growing infirm, and could scarcely hold to her wash-tub work much longer. It looked as though, in the near future, the little that Elisabel might spare from her slender wage, would be all that they would have to live on—tribute ludicrously small, even for those trained in lifelong penury.

All this Elisabel turned over in her mind again and again as she walked to and fro on the level sward by the riverside, her ears full of the happy song of the hives and the murmur of the gliding water. And then, at the lowest deep of her sorrowful perplexity, she stopped and threw up both her hands with a laugh of delight. A wonderful idea had suddenly occurred to her. She marvelled that she had never thought of it before. Her eyes kindled. Her lips drew together in the old determined line. Turning, she ran swiftly back down the orchard, threaded her way through the bright tangle of the garden, and burst into the house.

Breakfast was already laid in the little kitchen, and the old copper kettle was harping its busiest tune on the stove. Elisabel's trunk stood corded in the doorway, waiting for the carrier; and Mrs. March was vainly trying to pack one more jar into a basket of goodies already overloaded, when Elisabel came flying into the room. The girl drew up stock-still before her mother, facing her with wide-open, eloquent eyes.

"Mother," she cried, "don't bother any more with the packing. I have changed my mind. I am not going back to Marshminster."

Mrs. March sank into the nearest seat, and looked at

Elisabel concernedly. Speech was at all times a difficult business for the obese, asthmatic old woman, but she found breath for her words at last.

"Not goin', 'Lisbel? Not goin' back to—— Ah! 'tis they bees agen; I never did see th' like! Ha' they stung ye bad, gell? 'Tis th' black clothes; bees, they caan't ne'er abide black, 'Lisbel! Th' Reverend, when 'a comes, 'a dursn't goo nigher than——"

Elisabel laughed.

"What! sting me, mother? Never! And 'tisn't that would stop me. 'Tis something else altogether. Now, come to breakfast, mother, and I'll tell you all I have planned."

She sat herself down busily at the table, opposite the astounded old woman; but was up again the next moment, pacing the room as excitedly as ever.

"No! I'm not going back, mother. I'm never going back again. When the carrier comes, he'll have a letter to take for Marshminster; but he won't take me. I've had enough of town life: I'm going to stop in Whinbury now for the rest of my days."

She charged at the table, laid violent hands on bread-and-butter, then resumed her promenade, eating and talking as she went.

"It came to me all at once, mother, clear as day, what I had to do. You'll see how splendidly I shall manage. I know the work, and I know all the people, and——"

Mrs. March was beginning to collect her ideas and realise the new turn of affairs. The thought of having Elisabel always near her again was a very old and sweet one, though hitherto it had seemed immeasurably far off. She suddenly caught a breath of the girl's enthusiasm.

"Ay! 'tis the ill wind, 'Lisbel, blowin' good at laast to summun! So be it, gell; stay ye shall, an'—— But

sakes alive! my recollecks be clean goin'! Why, I never telled ye! 'Tis th' very thing! Mistus Petherway, they be sayin' as 'a warnts a churn-maid up at th' faarm; an' ye must goo along directly minnut, an'——"

Elisabel turned swiftly. She stopped her walk. She came and sat quietly down in her place at the table.

"Mother dear," she said, gravely enough now, "you don't understand. Leave churn-maids alone for a minute, and just think of something else. Tell me now—poor faather's bees, and the skep-weaving, and the honey-selling and that—what is going to become of it all?"

Grief had found difficult work in furrowing Mrs. March's jolly red countenance, but the sorrowful lines were plain enough now. She smoothed out her stiff black skirts despairingly.

"Oh, 'Lisbel, that be th' very worst on't! Pore faather, as a' lay dyin', 'a kep' on an' on: 'Doan't let Gen'lman-Laughton ever ha' bees o' mine!' 'a kep' all on a-sayin'. 'Let 'em goo to th' brimstone-pit,' 'a sez, 'every beeve o' th' lot, direckly I be gone. Gie me your promise o' it, Selina,' 'a sez, a'most wi' 'a's laast breath. 'That there Mystery-Laughton, as has tried fer ten long year to take th' bread from us folks' mouths, 'a'll be along certain-sure wi' 'a's dirty money,' sez pore faather, 'to buy up Whinbury beeves, like as not afore I be putt-in decent-like. But doan't ye let 'un goo, Selina,' 'a sez. 'Never ha' that man's money i' th' house, or 'twill bring a curse upon it: mark my dyin' wureds.' An' I promised, 'Lisbel; I—I——"

The girl had her arms round the sobbing old woman now.

"But don't you see, mother?" she cried. "Don't you understand what I'm going to do? Mr. Gentleman-Mystery-Laughton 'ull never have a chance of buying Whinbury beeves, because they won't be for sale. The

old bee-garden is to go on just the same as ever. That is going to be my work now, and you'll see how famously I will manage. Why! I can make skeps every bit as well as poor faather could; and haven't I lived amongst bees ever since I was a baby? I'll hive the swarms, and take the honey every week to Stavisham market, and—and—— But wait till you hear all my plans!"

She was up again and busily uncording her box, eager to obliterate all sign of her abandoned destiny. Mrs. March sat a moment in silence, watching this precipitate unpacking and slowly shaking her head.

"'Lisbel," said she, doubtfully, "ha' ye thought what 'tis y'are layin' hand to? Pore faather, wi' all his bee-larnin', 'a wur sore putt to't to hould his own; an' what can a woman do agen a man? Ay! an' sech a man, 'Lisbel! Wunnerful things 'a doos wi' bees, by all tellin'. Wunnerful?—wicked works o' th'—ah! o' him as ye dursn't name! Never a swarm, 'Lisbel; and yet more an' more o' they gurt white boxes every year. Full o' bees too, mind ye; an' where 'ud they come from? Ah! Maast' Laughton could tell ye, if 'a dared! An', would ye believe it, gell?—never no burnin'-time, never no takin'-up 'i th' way o' all Christian folk sin' th' wureld began. 'A jest spreads 'a's handkercher, an' th' pore bewitched critters, they goos crowdin' down out o' sight, an' lets 'un take away all as Gorra-mighty's gi'en 'em, wi'out never so much as a buzz! Ah, pore Caleb, 'a wur right! 'Tis black magic! 'Tis all a wicked bargainin' wi' th' besom-fairisees; an' what mightn't 'a do, 'Lisbel, if 'twur but a woman as tried to——"

She stopped. There was a sound of wheels grating in the lane. Elisabel peered out into the sunshine, shading her eyes with her hand.

"'Tis the carrier-cart, I think, mother. No! 'tis

George Lindup going by with a load of babbins. I'll get the letter ready now, or I may be late."

She cleared a corner of the table and fell to writing busily. But the next moment she looked up in surprise. The babbin-cart had stopped at the gate. The long-legged young man sprawling at the very summit of the mountainous load, was beginning to lower himself to the ground. Elisabel bent to her writing again. Presently they heard the gate-latch click. Muffled toe-steps began to sound on the garden-path. At last a long shadow projected itself through the doorway and came to rest on the sunny floor at Elisabel's feet. Elisabel wrote unconcernedly on.

"Mother," she said, "here's a fix I'm in! 'Yours truly'—I caan't say that, because it wouldn't be true. 'Yours sincerely'—'tis sincere enough, what I've written; but then 'tis too familiar. And 'Yours respectfully'—that would be the properest; but it would be just a downright story, and I caan't——"

A brown velveteen sleeve came round the door-post, and a bunch of mahogany knuckles rapped indecisively upon the door. A cough followed. Elisabel looked round with the greatest surprise.

"Well, I never did! Of all people! 'Tis Mr. Lindup, mother, come to see you! Good morning, Mr. Lindup! Mother won't be a minute, if you'll just——"

Mrs. March extricate herself sideways from the pantry, and came forward, wheezing hospitably.

"Mornin', George!" said she, regarding him with a kind eye. "How be ye? Doan't bide out there, George, as if ye 'lowed as ye warn't welcome. Step withinside jest a minnut: th' ould 'arse wunt run away wi' all that load ahent 'un, surelye."

Thus encouraged, George Lindup stood his long brass-bound whip in the porch, and ducked under the lintel.

But he gently declined the rush-bottomed chair that was pushed towards him.

"Na, na!" said he, backing into the nearest corner, where he stood bent at all joints, his brown, curly shock-head pressing hard against the whitewash of the ceiling. "Na, na, Mistus Maarch! 'Tis no time nor place fer sittin'-company: you as has lost a dear one; an' 'tother here a'most as good as gone, livin' so fur away from ye. Na, surelye!"

He took a wandering survey of the room, fingering the fringe of brown whisker under his shaven chin the while.

"But I heerd," he continued, after a full minute's silence, "I heerd as—as 'Lisbel wur off agen this marnin'; an' I made so free as jest look in a minnut to—to wish 'un good-bye, an'—an'——"

He came to a dead stop again, this time apparently to ascertain how many breadths of his broad thumbs went to the circumference of his hat-brim. He took so long about it that Mrs. March was constrained to come to his aid.

"Quite right, George!" she breathed in husky encouragement.

"An' if so be, Mistus Maarch," he went on at last, more slowly than ever; "if there wur any little sarvice, or odd job here an' there, as warnted a man to't, why—doan't ye see?—ne'er a wan on us but 'ud be mighty glad to—to—— Ye onderstand me, doan't ye? Wi' pore ould gaffer Caleb dead an' gone, an' 'Lisbel t'other end o' th' airth, as ye might say, I thought as how—like as not—p'raps——"

And here his speech became so disjointed and deliberate, that it ceased to be speech at all. He tailed off into permanent confusion.

The truth was that spruce, mettlesome young George Lindup—woodman, rinder, babbin-dealer, and the like;

master-workman in his own right, with his own timber-yard and ancestral roof-tree—who had never yet quailed before man or woman, was quailing miserably now. Under Elisabel's steady, serious glance he had become the prey of all sorts of strange emotional upheavals. Though he had seen her walking with her mother in the sad procession to the churchyard on the day before; had covertly feasted eyes on her at the graveside; and got a passing glance and word from her as he was lounging dreamily up the hill at sunset towards the "Five Shearers" inn, it had wanted this moment at close quarters to bring the girl to his full realisation.

Now he could only look at her, and shuffle, and desperately perspire with adulation. It must be the old Elisabel, he thought. No other human being could be here, in this house, calling Mrs. March "mother." But how could three short years have brought about such a change in her, such a blossoming, such a generous, upstart sapling-growth?

Many a time in his boyhood George Lindup had watched a chrysalis turn to a butterfly; had seen the dead, shrivelled morsel hanging in the sun-warmth under the beam, split and give forth a living thing that presently launched itself upon the air in beautiful, wide-winged energy of colour and motion. Always the wonder of this had profoundly stirred him. But it was nothing to the transformation that had come over Elisabel. He looked her down, from the cloudy darkness of her hair to the twin points of patent shoe-leather that gleamed under the edge of her fashionable skirts, and his heart drummed on his ribs audibly.

"What i' 'tarnal must ye do it fer, 'Lisbel?" he burst out at last. "Where be th' sense on't, gell? Here be a good hoame fer ye, an' them as warnts ye terr'ble bad, an' ould friends i' plenty. An'—Gorm!—off ye goos,

jest as if 'twur all nauthin' to ye, an' you naun but a common town-fed lady! Butter my wig! if I doan't feel as—as——"

Elisabel's gravity broke. The firm lips parted, and out shone the sunny whiteness of her teeth in a smile that all but drove George Lindup crazy. She moistened the flap of her envelope, and shut it down with a snap.

"So you think so bad of me as all that comes to, Mr. Lindup?" she said. "Well, I have got a piece of news for you. I've jacked up with Marshminster, and I'm never going back there any more."

At the word, George Lindup straightened himself suddenly. The ceiling gave forth a hollow boom as his head struck it, and little flakes of whitewash came scattering down on the red bricks of the kitchen floor. Apparently unaware of the effect of her pronouncement upon him, Elisabel looked past him at the radiant wilderness of the garden, thoughtfully twirling the envelope between her finger-tips.

"You see, 'tis the beeves," she went on to explain. "Mother, she caan't go on much longer by herself, even with her own bit of laundry-work, let alone see to the hives. So old Whinbury bee-garden, that faather kept going near upon fifty years, will have to be given up, unless somebody else can look after it. And who should do that better than I? No, 'tis plain enough, what I have got to do now, and I have made up my mind to it. Do you think I shall make a good bee-master, Mr. Lindup?"

But George was not nearly ready for sober commentary on the scheme. As yet he could only stare open-mouthed at her, lost in astonishment and delight at the news conveyed to him. Elisabel to stop in Whinbury! Marshminster, his ultima Thule of world-vastness and co-operative iniquity, to know her no more? He to breathe the

same common air with her, take a share in the same wind and sunshine, tread the same dust she trod? It all seemed weirdly, fantastically impossible. He rubbed his sun-blackened brows with his bent wrist, and stared from one face to the other before him in a bewilderment of doubt and joy.

It was the dubiety and lack of enthusiasm on the older woman's features that at length brought George Lindup back to his usual sane condition of mind.

"Glad? Ah! that I be, George!" wheezed Mrs. March, "real glad to ha' 'Lisbel back to th' ould hutch, an' well 'a knaws it. But this yere notion o' th' child's! Lor' ha' mussy! I dunno—I doan't indeed!"

She stopped to fetch her breath.

"Now what might ye think on't, George?" she went on anxiously, "you as minds well all pore Caleb had agen him? Terr'ble hard putt to't, 'a wur, o' late years, as ye knaws well, George; an' him a good Christian man. But what'll a gel do, think ye? agen th' Bee-Barn wizard, wi' all his pook-hale, Lord's-prayer-back'ards wickedness?"

Elisabel laughed.

"Why, 'tis all nonsense, that, mother—about Mr. Laughton!" she cried. "He is just a clever business-man who hates old things, and likes to do everything with new-fangled machinery. The world is full of his sort. But I mean to show him that the old ways are just as good as ever. Faather, while he kept health and strength, could make the bees thrive, though he did put it down to his regular prayers-going. You didn't hear any talk then about Mr. Laughton 'witching his honey black, nor whistling the swarms away from him. No, indeed! Faather—he got too old and slow, and his eyesight too dim—that was all that was the matter with Whinbury beeves!"

She had two solemn, dubious faces opposed to her now. George Lindup rumpled his brown curls perplexedly.

"Maast' Laughton," he hesitated at last, "'a be a real man an' a gen'leman, as ne'er a wan i' th' village 'ull deny. But—but—— Ye see, 'Lisbel, there be a-many things as folks caan't onderstand about 'un. Clever?—ah! I b'leeve ye, gell! A good neighbour?—aye, surelye! But what manner o' man 'a be, an' where 'a coom from all they years ago, never a wan can tell. 'Tis mortal cur'ous, to say th' least on't—a man as 'ud never gie no account o' hisself to no one; an' no letters, nor friends comin'; an' naun else as happens i' ornery folks' lives. Ah! well, well! But I wish ye luck, gell; an'—an' if so be as any little job, so to say, about th' place warnts a man to—— Lorsh! 'tis eight o'clock strikin'! I must be getten along."

He took a hasty farewell of them both and made off precipitately. He had gone but half-way down the garden-path when Elisabel remembered that she must be looking out for the carrier who was to take her letter. She overtook George Lindup just as he had passed through the gap in the barberry hedge, where nestled the little green gate made of barrel-staves. Leaning her arms upon the gate, Elisabel watched George Lindup for a while in silence, as he tightened his horse's girth, and made some small changes in the disposition of his load, preparatory to his long journey to Stavisham. Elisabel suddenly found the silence irksome.

"Mr. Lindup," said she, "did ever you see the barberry so fine? 'Tis just like a cloud of gold in the air——"

"*Mister* Lindup!"

George had climbed midway up to his perch on the babbins when he turned, echoing the word ruefully.

"*Mister!*" he repeated, looking down upon the girl with reproachful eyes. "So three year ha' made all that

differ atween us, ha' they, 'Lisbel? Well, well! 'Tis th' trew way o' things, like as not: I dunno. Now, how many more year 'ull go by afore——"

Elisabel met his glance searchingly.

"George, then—if you like that better. There! 'tis done in a moment, George! And you always thought a deal of the old barberry-hedge, didn't you?"

"Ay! an' so I do still, 'Lisbel!" he answered her, with a sudden warmth and earnestness. "Well I minds the day long ago as ye stood there waitin' fer th' carrier jest as ye be now; an' ould Caleb ahent ye wi' bees in's beard as 'a allers had; an' your mither a-cryin' at losin' ye; an'—Lorsh! 'Lisbel!—what a slim threadpaper o' a maid ye wur; an' how ye ha' growed; ay, an' filled out, gell, past all belief o' mortal man!"

The colour shot up to her brows under his ardent gaze. She laughed, then grew suddenly grave. It occurred to her that a change of subject had become strategically advisable.

"Mother tells me, George, that you are getting along famous with the Stavisham lawyer-folk. Fifty pounds of it paid back already, and——"

George Lindup's deep-set blue eyes went roving to the horizon. He was silent awhile. When he spoke, the tenderness in his voice, that had warned Elisabel, had disappeared. He spoke darkly, and with an incontrollable bitterness.

"Ay! 'tis so, 'Lisbel. But fifty pun!—Lorsh! 'tis no more'n a drop in the sea! Pore faather, ye see, 'a never really knowed how 'twur wi' 'un. 'Allers look on the bright side!' 'a kep' on a-sayin'; an' 'a made it out so dazzlin' bright, 'a did, that 'a never could see naun at all behither 'a's nose. An' so things went fr' bad to wuss, 'Lisbel, wi'out 'a's real knowin'. But, Lor', gell! Time—time 'ull see me through wi' it unner Gorra-

mighty's help. An' when I be three score an' ten, belike, ould an' lonely i' th' wureld, I'll ha' all clear. Ah! an' there be the carrier, wi' a cushion-cheer an' all fer ye! Gorm! 'a wunt take on when 'a hears ye bean't a-goin',— not 'aaf!"

He cracked his whip, and started his slow-going old mare into the semblance of a trot. Elisabel waved a hand to him. She was still looking his way, and still waving, when he turned at the distant bend of the street for a last backward glance.

CHAPTER III

HONEY-CRAFT

"GENERAL!" said Mr. Claud Laughton, as he stood at the door of the Bee-Barn, smoking an after-breakfast pipe and considering the day's work that lay before him; "General, the morning is fair, and the wind is down, as I told you it would be. We'll get to spring-cleaning."

He took a turn along the raised verandah that ran the entire length of the old barn on this, its southern side, and stood for a moment at the far end, contemplating the entrancing prospect before him.

The east wind that takes the colour out of the air, had gone at last. There was just a breath puffing from the south-west, and all the dells and wooded hollows in the landscape were brimming over with soft azure. The old threshing-barn, which years ago Laughton and his one man-of-all-work had converted with their own unaided hands into a queer, but not uncomfortable dwelling, stood midway up the hillside against a sheltering clump of pines. There was a strip of flower-garden under its grey flint walls, where the bees kept up an incessant droning melody; and, beyond this, a stretch of grassland sloped steeply down towards the village, dotted over with innumerable beehives, all of the most approved modern pattern, and all painted spotless white.

Laughton let his eye roam over his well-ordered property with serene satisfaction. There was a time when, standing in this same corner of the vine-wreathed balcony, he could have counted his bee-colonies on the fingers of his two hands. But that was in the lean, penurious years that followed his first coming to Whinbury. Now the mimic city of hives covered the entire stretch of meadow down to the laneside. Laughton had become a prosperous bee-master, whose wares were known and sought for all the district through.

He knocked out his pipe, and strolled back to where he had left the General sitting on the doorstep peeling potatoes for a prospective stew. Laughton paused for an instant, watching his factotum in amused silence. A cauldron of liquor stood at the General's side, and every few seconds a potato was dropped in with a clear musical plomp. All the time, the General kept up a low whistle of some gay military air, his huge bald head bent over his work, so that Laughton, from his altitude, could see nothing of his features. So absorbed was he in his task and in his martial melody, that it took several applications of Laughton's foot, each one more vigorous than the last, to rouse him to attention. And then he sprang up to his full yard-and-a-half or so of stature, puffed out his rabbit-chest, and brought one great red hand smartly to the salute. His sombre, watery eyes regarded Laughton with much of the look of the faithful mastiff in them.

"Aye, aye, maaster!" he cried. "Forrard 'tis! 'Tention! Right 'aaf turn! Maarch!"

He seized the handles of the barrow that stood hard by, ready laden with the materials for the day's task, and set off down the main central way of the bee-farm, Laughton following in the rear.

Never before, perhaps, in the history of queerly assorted fellowships had such a pair of workmates got together

as the Whinbury bee-master and his man. Laughton, well over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, generously proportioned, the collar of his flannel shirt open to his hairy chest, and an ancient Panama tilted back from his massive forehead, looked as if he might have made his mark in any combative profession, either of muscle or mind. But the General himself had little more suggestion of the soldier about him than his talk and his whistle. He came barely up to Laughton's shoulder; his bandy legs moved with a limp and a halt; he carried his head low and askew, as if he were perpetually on the watch for rearward hostile advances.

Of a truth, his military rank was of purely local origin. Jokes, in Whinbury, were never allowed to die. As to old wine, antiquity brought them only additional flavour; and though, on Laughton's advent to the village, the humour in dubbing poor, slow-witted John Gates the "General," was already several years old, it was then, as now, still a much used piece of popular currency. It had its inception in the fact that Gates, when already past middle-age, tired of flint-picking and "turmut"-hoeing, had suddenly yielded to a fine revolt of spirit; and, without a word to anyone, had tramped off to Marshminster barracks and offered himself for a soldier. The next day saw him back again at his field-work; but the long hours he had spent, after his rejection by the recruiting authorities, in gazing through the barrack-ground railings at the squad-drill and the glittering uniforms, had served permanently to deflect his feeble wits in a new direction. His incessant talk of his experiences soon got him the nickname by which he had ever since been accosted; and Laughton, who in a moment of compassion for the industrious, good-tempered, but much-tormented little man, had offered him work on the bee-farm, had never known him by any other.

The General stopped at the end of the long row of hives, and master and man set to work on the business of the day. The General had armed himself with bee-veil and sting-proof gauntlets, and went gingerly, even timorously, about his task. Laughton's only preparation was to roll his shirt-sleeves up to the arm-pits, and give his old Panama a more decided tilt.

Seen in the grey shadow of the balcony, his well-shaped, regular features composed, his dark eyes at rest on the horizon, an observer would have judged the bee-master to have been a man still in the very prime of youth, in spite of a certain immobility, a set sternness of expression. But out here in the searching light of the April morning, one would have been constrained to add a full ten years at least to a first estimation of his age.

Laughton's was a baffling face. Viewed from any angle, it displayed a sheer strength, almost a brutality, of outline. The vivid April sun cut deeper still the lines in the broad forehead and about the corners of the full-lipped mouth, bringing into sharp relief marks that were the abiding stamp either of past dissipation or past great suffering. The eyes were large and of a strange lustre under their straight dark brows, and seemed always serious and questioning even when the rest of the face relaxed into a smile, good-humoured enough, yet seldom without its shadow of irony.

People complained of Laughton's habitual reticence, nay, his downright secrecy, as to his affairs, past or present. But where no voluble relatives exist, the details of a man's life transpire only by exchange of confidence, or by direct, unblushing questioning. That through neither of these channels anything of Laughton's antecedents had reached the idle ears of Whinbury, was due, without a doubt, to his own persistent intention. But it was significant of the man that no attempt had ever

been made to exploit either of these vehicles. An aloofness of manner, whether native or assumed, that could change in a moment to absolute frigidity, forbade the one, as it rendered the other perilous. And so by gentle and simple alike, with few exceptions, he was spoken of as just Mystery-Laughton, and no more; to which those disposed in his favour added a condoning shrug, and those inimically minded a meaning shake of the head.

Claud Laughton and his faithful henchman kept steadily to their task of the spring hive-cleaning among the bees, working down the long rows of hives with the precision of men mowing a swathe.

The General wielded the subduing apparatus and effected all unimportant preliminaries. A quick puff of smoke in at the crowded entrance of each hive produced an angry roar within, that quietened immediately to a low simmer of terror. Then the General whipped off the hive-roof and stood aside.

Now it was the master's turn. Swiftly he removed the quilts and laid bare the seething interior of the brood-nest; one by one the comb-frames were lifted out, keenly examined, cleansed of their winter foulness, returned to their station in the hive. Worn-out combs were replaced by new ones, the queen-bee found and her continued fertility ascertained, the general welfare of the stock craftfully expedited—in a minute or two fresh clean quilts had cut off the blinding sunshine from the terror-stricken multitude below; the old steamy fragrant darkness that bees love, was back once more to the hive; and master and man were busy with the next stall.

As the two worked, they talked. It was seldom that a day began and found the General without an exhaustless supply of small items of local gossip.

"Peavey," said he, after a while, "Peavey, 'a be real putt out ower this yere new move o' th' Reverend's

There wunt be no trouble now, 'a says, soon as ould Faarmer Petherway sets eyes on 'em—no! not 'aaf!"

"And what new move is that, General?"

"Han't ye heered, maaster?" The General came nearer, and lowered his voice to an awe-stricken whisper. "Long candles! 'Tis th' thin end o' Popery, Peavey says; an' 'a be right. An' Sabie, that there Scarlet 'Ooman, 'a be at th' bottom on't. Did ever ye hear th' like?"

Laughton laughed.

"Have you seen the candles yourself, General?"

"No, maaster; nor Peavey neether. But 'twur a gurt heavy long box as come by th' carrier; an' there wur th' label, 'Rev. Alan Jenyns, With Care,' all plain as plain. Na, na! 'tis trew enow. Sabie, 'a'll ha' a deal to answer fer, when 'a gets pooked unner—you maark me!"

He worked on silently for a minute or two. And then he went off in an apoplexy of chuckles.

"An' what do ye think o' this'n? They never knowed as I heered un from th' tap-room; but Mistus Lorrie, 'a do pipe up that shrill otherwhiles. Why, 'a said as how ould Caleb's darter, she be agoin' to—to——"

He was so amused at the piece of information he was about to impart, that he could marshal the facts only with the greatest difficulty.

"'Lisbel, 'er as went away to Marshminster these three year back, she be a-goin' to—to—what 'ud ye guess now?—why, 'a be goin' to turn bee-maaster!"

He drew back, the better to enjoy the expected scornful merriment of his chief. But Laughton merely stopped the harsh note of his scraping-tool a moment, to consider the point a little absent-mindedly.

"Well; and a good thing too, I should say," he remarked at length. "Someone will have to help the old lady, if she is to keep the bees on; and you and I wouldn't

have dared to. What did you call the girl?—'Lisbel? Why, yes—I remember her now. A lean, long piece—wasn't she?—with a papery face, and a scowl for me whenever I passed her. Oh, yes! I can recall her perfectly well. A new hive here, General, for number forty-three; and this one can go for firewood. Now, forty-four! Sharp with the smoker!"

They worked on for some time, each busy with his own thoughts. The sun was getting high, and the blue air beginning to tremble in the distant hollows under the gathering heat of the morning. A steady murmur of life uprose from the village below them. On the river the tan sail of a chalk-barge—like the wing of a copper butterfly—moved slowly northward, dipped at the bridge, then rose and filled again languidly, as it crept on past grey-green osier beds and vivid emerald of marshlands. Of a sudden the General dropped his reeking implement, and put up a great finger in the air.

"Hark!" cried he delightedly, "did ye hear'n, maaster? Pipe—pipe—pipe—pipe!—ower there i' Kingham's wood? 'Tis th' cuckoo's mate! An' another day or two 'o this brave weather 'ull fill th' ould woman's poke fer Heffell Fair, come next Sadderday! Ah! an' what kind o' burd be ut this time?"

A shrill "Coo-oo-ee!" had rung out on the clear air, sounding from somewhere down in the wooded lane below the bee-farm. Laughton stopped his work, somewhat impatiently, to gaze in the direction of the call, shading his eyes with his hand. The rich high note pealed out again. The General smiled knowingly. He turned a roguish side-eye on his master.

"Ah! ye heerd that'n quick enow! Nobbut wan burd wi' a voice o' that quality! Miss Rose—gie her a pair o' wings, an' send her up there alonger th' larkses, an' there beant wan on 'em, I'll go bail, as 'ud——"

He stopped, for he found himself addressing empty air. At the first call, Laughton had merely waved his hat and gone on with his work. But at the repetition of the call, he laid down his tools resignedly. Now he was slowly descending the path to the laneside, drawing on his coat as he went.

Rose Petherway had reined in her horse near a gap of the hedge. She sat in the saddle now, watching Laughton, as he won his leisurely way towards her through the hives. He came to a halt at last a few feet distant, and swept his old straw hat ceremoniously to the ground.

"Marry!" said he, greeting her in the mock-heroic way long customary between them, "and what brings fair Mistress Rose abroad so early, unattended? And to what lucky chance must her humble servant ascribe the favour of a visit?" To himself he said, "Jove! how it suits her—dark green! But she oughtn't to wind the poor brute like that!"

Of a truth both horse and rider showed the same effect of their long gallop over the Downs. The chestnut was an immense, broad-chested, stalwart beast; but he needed all these attributes to carry Rose Petherway, and do the work she commonly exacted from him. Sitting half-turned in the saddle, her great breasts heaving, her cheeks flushed, her fair hair blown loose about her brows, she looked extraordinarily fine, almost gross, of figure, as she gazed down on Laughton, a smile dimpling at the corners of her mouth.

"Claud, I'm not in the mood for nonsense!" she said to him imperiously. "I came to scold you for forgetting about to-night, as I know you have; and to remind you of your solemn sacred promise to come. Ah! did I not tell you so?"

She had interpreted aright the sudden look of comic dismay on his face. But he hastened to appease her.

He drew nearer, looking her straight in the eyes—the big, sulky, sensuous, grey eyes that were seldom more than half open.

"Well; I *had*, Rose—to tell the plain, honest truth!" he said apologetically. "But I should have been there all the same. The General—you know he never forgets anything; and he would have been sure to remind me. Who is coming?"

Rose Petherway flicked idly at the prune-blossom in the hedgerow with her riding-whip, sending a shower of spent petals like snow to his feet.

"Oh! the usual gang!" she said, laughing. "Nobody I care about in the least. That is why I—— Oh! I forgot! Yes, there's a friend of Tom's—someone from Town, who is stopping at Stavisham. And that's another reason!"

Her laugh rang out again—a laugh like the sudden clang of rich-toned bells. She looked away. Laughton's dark eyes appraised her secretly. There was no doubt about the green riding-habit. Faultlessly cut to all the full, yet perfectly-moulded lines of her superb figure, it set off the milk and roses of her face and the spun gold of her hair, as foliage to blossom. Laughton came close to the hedge-gap.

"Now, you know, Rose," he remonstrated, "I lead very much the life of a hermit. Dances are rather out of my line—at least, they are now. I shall be a kind of skeleton at the feast. So you must not be angry with me if I make an early and permanent disappearance into the card-room with the other old fogies; and leave the ground clear for——"

She caught him up.

"Claud, I will never forgive you if you do! A hermit? What nonsense! And you know how I hate boys! You folk are never worth talking to until you are over

thirty. But we have argued all that out years ago. Besides, everyone is saying what a shame it is you keep yourself cooped up as you do. And it is not good for any man. So I have made up my mind to get you out of it."

She spoke with the old joking pretence of assured power over him, and expected in return the usual counter of high-flown persiflage. But he only looked at her in thoughtful, rather questioning silence. Rose bent in her saddle.

"Then it is quite settled? You will not disappoint me?" she said, giving him her hand.

It was some moments before he answered her. The warm pressure of her fingers, the new look in her eyes, had set his thoughts wandering in an entirely novel channel. For an instant he was dazed, and almost forgot to return the grip and glance.

"Yes, if it is your wish; and gladly, Rose."

"Very well, then, dear bee-master!"

She drew back her hand at last. She wheeled her charger round into the dust and sunshine of the lane.

"Wait a bit!" he called to her. "What are you going to wear to-night?"

"Something you have never yet seen, Mr. Inquisitive!"

His face fell.

"Why not the old blue and silver?" he asked ruefully.

She was looking at him, her head thrown back, the languorous grey eyes almost closed in the sunshine.

"Good gracious! My maid has spirited that old thing away ages ago! What ideas men have! But you will not be disappointed, Claud. Just wait and see!"

He leant through the hedge-gap, watching her as she cantered off down the lane. Then he turned and went slowly up through the bee-farm. It was nearing mid-day, and all the young bees were turning out for their

noontide gambols. Round every hive a singing multitude hovered. The blue air was full of silver sparks from innumerable flashing wings. Laughton, who loved the music of the hives more perhaps than any other sound in nature, heard nothing of it to-day. He passed through the great main way of the bee-farm, head lowered, eyes upon the ground; answered mechanically some question of the General's as he drew near; went on to the Bee-Barn and disappeared through the vine-garlanded door. He walked straight to his own corner of the big central living-apartment where his writing-table stood, took down a little three-cornered piece of looking-glass, and fell to studying himself in it.

"Why not?—in the name of all that is human, and real, and worth having in the world—why—why not?"

The words burst involuntarily from his lips. He went to the stove, and gave the General's pot a meditative stir with the wooden spoon that stuck up out of it. As he stirred, he thought and thought; and now and again a word rose to his lips, much as the potatoes kept bobbing up to the smoking surface of the cauldron.

"A ripe plum! . . . Ripe, and ready for the first hand that will stretch for it! . . . And why not mine? . . . It is not as if I were too old for her, not as these things are done nowadays. . . . But——" He pondered long over the word, then threw the spoon away from him with a ringing, bitter laugh. "You fool, you fool! It is giving up your last ideal, your last hope of immortality; and well you know it! A beautiful animal, and a sack of gold!—that is the naked sole truth of it. And will you sell your dream, the one pure dream of your life, just for these? No! —a thousand times, no!"

"Maaster, 'tis th' Reverend as warnts ye!"

Laughton was up in his bedroom, employing the last

red light of the day in alternate fits of staring at the carpet, and determined wrestles with an obstinate cravat. The General's voice, sounding from the living-room below, with its comical blend of deference and defiance, brought him out of his semi-abstraction with a start. He went to the door and peered cautiously down.

The conversion of the barn into a dwelling-house was something of a triumph in its way. The deep bays to east and west had been walled up to the roof, and each bay divided horizontally. The upper rooms formed the sleeping quarters respectively of the bee-master and his man; and access to them from the central apartment was gained by ladders of such generous build that they could almost be dignified by the name of staircases. The lower rooms were employed in the business of the bee-farm; and there all the material and appliances of the craft had their place. The central portion of the barn—where in olden times fully laden waggons of corn used to drive bodily in, to discharge their golden burdens right and left into the bays—made a room of nothing less than noble proportions. It extended sheer up to the roof, and its spaciousness had been greatly augmented by taking in the vast porches to north and south, so that many a mansion on that countryside could scarce show an apartment of finer dimensions.

Laughton was fond of describing himself as a hermit; but there was little of the eremitish character about the appointments of this living-room or hall, as it might well have been named. From the first he had recognised, and in great part realised, its possibilities. Picturesquely Bohemian it all was, but with a free, backwoodsman-like spirit in its studied artistry. The great beams of the roof and walls had been filled in with plastered reeds in the old south-country way. Here and there, high and low, windows had been cunningly devised, and still more

cunningly glazed, so that wherever the sunlight penetrated, some tinge of soft colour fell with it upon the polished oaken floor.

The furniture was of a piece with the character of the apartment. Old trestle-tables and ancient, high-backed chairs; a carved oak dresser black with centuries of age, but rejuvenated with its rows of shining pewter and blue Delft china-ware; a few pictures in heavy gilt frames; some mounted antlers and other sporting trophies; sheaves of spears and assegais in odd corners; an Eastern rug or two thrown down with apparent carelessness here and there on the black mirror of the floor. And in the midst of it all, under the failing evening light—as Laughton peered down from his crow's-nest in the western bay—sitting, college-cap on knee, and fingers drumming thoughtfully on the table, was a lean figure in a long black cassock, girt about the middle with a black silk rope.

Claud descended and advanced to meet his visitor. The Reverend Alan Jenyns rose to his feet, and for a moment the two men faced each other, the rector more than doubtful of his reception, Claud undecided whether to proffer his hand.

It was a difficult occasion. In all the years they had inhabited the same village, there had passed between these two no more than the briefest, most formal greeting—a raising of the hat on the one side, and from the other the lifting of two fingers of a hand. Claud was avowedly no high-churchman; the rector had a morbid, well-bred horror of intrusion, which he carried almost to the fine point of social cowardice. Laughton knew that something greatly out of the common ruck of affairs must have brought him to the Bee-Barn; and this his look expressed all too plainly as at last he ventured to put forth a hand. The hearty grip he received, astonished him.

"Mr. Laughton," said the rector, "you will expect to hear a good reason for this rather untimely visit. But I do not even know whether I have that excuse; at least, I am not sure how you will take——"

He stopped, looking at his host in obviously gathering doubt. A strangely contrasted pair they were—the stalwart, well-favoured man faultlessly attired in evening dress; and the other in his rusty priest's gown, lean and bent, cadaverous of visage, though handsome in his own dry, ascetic way.

"Mr. Laughton," the rector went on suddenly, "are you Tom Petherway's friend? If not, I have no business here. But if you are, then we share a common duty together; and I want to talk to you."

The question surprised Claud. It could be answered in only one way, and he knew the rector was well aware of it. He waived the point as superfluous.

"I am ready to talk," he said guardedly.

The rector turned upon him. A blemish of mirth came in his austere face.

"Now do not think I am against him in any way, Mr. Laughton, nor in collusion with anyone. I give you my word I am here solely as his true well-wisher, and on my own instigation purely. Believe that much of me, and we shall get on better together."

"Well, then," said Claud, now plainly more at his ease. "Yes, I am Tom Petherway's friend."

The rector sat down again.

"Good! And now I can unburthen my mind to you a little, Mr. Laughton. By the way, do you smoke? I wish you would. I can't; but I love the smell of it. Well now: about Tom Petherway. I am greatly concerned at the way he is going on. I must tell you that the vicar of Stavisham is a lifelong friend of mine, and he has felt it his duty from time to time to keep me

posted as to the town-doings of any of my parishioners. And he sends me but a poor account of Tom. He has got, it seems, into a very undesirable set there. Do you know the 'Royal Oak'? Ah! I see you do! But your laugh misgives me. It would be no laughing matter for poor Farmer Petherway and his good wife, if—if something disgraceful were to happen."

The rector squared his elbows on the table, and tried to look Claud in the face under the fast fading light.

"Now this is what I came to ask you to do, Mr. Laughton. If Dr. Brent were home, he, by reason of his old school-mate friendship with Tom, would have been the right person to act in the matter. But his ship is still away in the China Seas, as his sister, Lucy Brent, informs me. So the doctor is out of the question. And there is really no one else but you. Mr. Laughton, let me beg of you to remonstrate with Tom. Use your influence with him to bring him to some sense of duty or at least decency. Night after night he spends riotously with these flash, low-class companions of his, who make the infamous 'Royal Oak' their headquarters; and he is continually returning home in the most deplorable condition. Already he has been mixed up in some disreputable affair, which was hushed up—how, I have no means of knowing. But there must soon come an end to it all, in one way or the other. Laughton, Laughton! is there no way to save the boy? You who are his friend, and know the world so much better than I—is there nothing, nothing that you can do?"

He got up hastily and began to measure the length of the apartment with uneasy stride. Dusk had fallen, so that Claud could scarce make out the shadowy figure passing and repassing before him. He rose and lighted the candles. The two men faced each other in the sudden yellow glow. The fact was that, to Laughton and most

of the folk in Whinbury, all this that the rector had told him about Tom Petherway, had long been very stale news indeed. For the moment Claud was at a loss for words.

"Why, of course," he hesitated at last, "if you think that any remonstrance of mine will have the slightest effect on him, it shall be made, and that at once. But I—you see—well, candidly, Mr. Jenyns, I know Tom Petherway better than you do, and I very much doubt whether any possible good can come of it."

"But try—try your best!" the rector pleaded earnestly. "You are dressed for society. I think I know where you are going to-night. You will probably have a chance for a serious word with him. Then, if you have done all you can, you will at least have a clear conscience, no matter what happens."

The time was already past when Laughton's presence was expected at Whinbury Farm. Excusing himself, he reached for his cloak, and the two men went down to the village together, talking earnestly. At the corner of the side-lane which led to the farm, the rector stopped, and gave Claud another of his wincing grips.

"Now that we have struck up an acquaintance at last, Laughton," he said, "you must let me come again sometimes to see you. And you must come and give me a look-in at the Rectory. We are both bachelors, as you know. But Sabie, my housekeeper, she is by no means a bad hand at a bowl of punch, and I will take my tobacco through you, vicariously. And oh! by the by, do you play billiards? I have had the old table done up, and got a new set of cues down from town; they only arrived yesterday."

He did not understand Claud's laugh.

"Billiard-cues? Why, I heard—— Yes, I will come, rector, with all the pleasure in life! If we work side by side, it is only right we should sometimes play together."

CHAPTER IV

THE DANCE AT THE FARM

OLD Whinbury farmhouse was built for jollity, and many a time before, Laughton had seen it in festal guise. But late as he was, he could not help pausing a moment in the darkness under the cedars by the great white gates, to look upon all before him with a feeling of wonder.

The rambling, ancient, many-gabled place was alight from roof-tree to basement. Strings of Chinese lanterns glimmered amongst the trees that edged in the broad gravel-path, and Laughton could see that a crimson drugget had been laid from where he stood all the way to the great house-door. The revelry was already nearing its height. Through the open windows came the strains of music, the muffled thunder of the dancers' feet, and a babel of voices and laughter. Claud's pulses quickened. He hurried up the path, eager as any boy to join the throng.

When Farmer Petherway made merry with his friends, there was only one apartment in the house that could contain the bidden company. This was the great kitchen, where, in olden times—when every man employed on the farm was a member of the household—all could sit down to meat at the same time, in no wise crowded. But to-night the spaciousness of the room was taxed to its utmost. As Laughton won his way through the gabbling,

heated folk loitering in the entrance-way, and stood for a minute or two by the kitchen-door, looking in upon the scene, he thought he had never beheld such a maelstrom of colour and sound and ceaseless motion.

The place had been shorn of its usual appurtenances, so far as the floor and walls were concerned. The wide area of oak parqueterie was cleared for the dancers; the whole room was hung round with innumerable flags and gaily-coloured drapery. A recess commonly given over to steaming cider-barrels and gyle-tuns of brewing ale, was now the bower of a reverberating grand piano, hidden in a jungle of hothouse palms and fairy-lights. The black abyssos of the chimney-corner had been transformed into a fernery, within which Farmer Petherway stood warming his back against maidenhair and polypodiums, his great blank, rosy face suffused with a placid enjoyment of all before him.

Only the ceiling far above preserved its character of everyday domestic seriousness. Radiating lines of paper lanterns splayed themselves over the entire expanse of the room within a foot or so of the heads of the pirouetting, surging throng; but through this trellis of frivolity Laughton could dimly make out—hanging in solemn conclave from the smoke-blackened beams of the roof—strings of brown onions, obese hams, sides of bacon, each a perfect porcine silhouette, innumerable bunches of dried herbs in newspaper funnels, and countless other objects and implements of unconjecturable culinary use.

A waltz was in progress. Claud was acquainted with, or knew well by sight, nearly all those present, young or old; and as the various couples came whirling past him, he gave or took occasional smiles and nods of recognition. He soon caught sight of Rose. She was at the far end of the room, dancing with a tall, dark man, who was evidently hard put to it to engineer her in safety through

the crowd of jostling country high-steppers. But at length the couple managed to extricate themselves from the crush, and drew slowly in Claud's direction.

Claud stepped back into the shadow of the doorway, his breath coming hard and quick. Rose had said that he would not be disappointed with her new frock. Yet he hardly knew how to describe his feeling on a close view of the gown and its wearer. If intense astonishment, sudden heart-churning admiration, a delighted sense of being utterly shocked at its daring, can exist concomitantly with genuine disappointment, then Claud was a prey to that complicated and self-contradictory emotion. He withdrew deeper into the shadow as Rose and her cavalier approached, and stared with all his eyes.

She was magnificent—a moving, pearl-crowned tower of delicious womanhood; and, so far, wholly desirable and justified. But— Claud's breath whistled in through his set teeth. "D—— these skimpy French fashions!" he muttered uncontrollably. Yet he followed Rose round the room with eyes that greedily drank in all that his words condemned.

The designed appeal of her toilet might have conquered even good Saint Anthony. She was arrayed in satin of a pale opalescent grey, that shone like a mirror as she moved. But for a diamond pendant on her bosom and the sparkling buckles of her shoes, her whole accoutrement was severely plain and unadorned. Not a frill or a break in its smooth continuity, not a hiatus of soft condoning ruffle anywhere. "She looks," muttered Laughton to himself as his fascinated glance strove to keep her in view, "she looks—well! she looks exactly as if she had been dipped up to the arm-pits—no higher—in molten mother-of-pearl, and then burnished! Ye gods! I were safer at home!"

And now he became aware of jovial signals being made to him from the direction of the fernery. Old Tom

Petherway had his doubled fist to his mouth, tipping it up as though it were a glass. With his other hand he beckoned to Claud with humorous peremptoriness. The shrill pop of a champagne cork reached Laughton's ears, and he saw that, behind the screen of foliage, the deep recess of the chimney-corner sheltered several of the older folk, principally tenants of the neighbouring farms. Claud waved a response, and began to pick his difficult way round the room, alternately tripping over the feet of the sitters along the walls, and being cannoned into by the dancing throng.

"Oo! Ay! Laughton, boy!" cried Farmer Petherway, seizing Claud's hand and dragging him into the fernery. "Here you be, then, at last! Bees a-swarmin', kep' ye, lad? Ha! ha! ha! Never no swarms allowed at your patent factory, eh? Why, the next thing, ye'll be makin' honey without bees at all! Ha! ha! ha! ha! Here, missus! One o' them long tumblers for Mr. Laughton! No dry dancin' i' this house, I'll see to't!"

Claud took the champagne from Mrs. Petherway, and stood aside with her for a moment, chatting, and looking on at the gay scene.

"I'm sure 'tis all going as nice as nice could be!" crooned Mrs. Petherway, a ring of triumph and relief in her soft voice. "But deary me! Mr. Laughton; if only you had been here an hour ago! Such trouble we were all in, as you'd never think! Poor Rose! when word came as Bridger had took bad, and couldn't come from Stavisham to play the pianner—dear, dear! I thought she'd ha' cried, I did! But I said, 'Rose,' I said, 'send Nellie Brimble down this instant-minute to the "Moorings," and give my best regards to Miss Lucy, and I'd be most obliged if she'd come and——'"

Claud faced about in astonishment. He reddened.

"It is never Lucy Brent playing, is it, Mrs. Petherway?"

He smothered his indignation with a smile. "Why, I was looking for her among the dancers! You always do ask her, don't you? And why ever——"

"Oh, indeed, she was invited, Mr. Laughton!" Mrs. Petherway hastened to assure him with wide-open eyes. "I am most careful never to let Lucy think that because she is only the schoolmistress—— And, of course, I shall see that she is well paid, never fear o' that. 'Tis true she's a sea-captain's daughter; but such a small pension as they have, I'm sure that even half a sovereign—— Oh! now the dance is over at last! And here comes Rose! Gracious! how hot an' out o' breath the child be!"

"Save me! Save me, Claud!"

Rose spoke in a low, hurried whisper as she took Laughton's arm, and let him lead her round the room in the ranks of the strolling couples.

"What is the matter?" he asked in the same low voice, his eyes on the heaving diamond pendant.

Her grip tightened on his arm.

"That hateful man! You saw him, did you not? He dances like an angel, but—but—I can't think how Tom ever—— Save me, dear, dear bee-master! I was forced to promise him some more; but here is my programme, and if you—— Take it quick, Claud! I think he is coming over to us!"

Claud took the little slip of gilt card. He scrawled "C. L." in half a dozen of the blanks, Rose watching him.

"Go on!" she said anxiously, as he paused. "Do you mind? There's the supper-dance, and two more waltzes at the bottom. And oh! I wouldn't risk 'Sir Roger' with a fiery iceberg for anything!"

Claud hesitated. He laughed quietly to himself. But the diamond pendant buoyed up on a sudden mountainous billow under his eyes, and the pencil scratched willingly on. A tall figure stopped before them with a bow.

"Miss Petherway, I think, was so graciously kind as to promise me the honour again. Will she permit me, before I lose sight of her in the giddy throng?"

He smiled, holding out a confident hand for Rose's programme. He was a tall man, fully of the height of Claud. He had a bony frame excessively tailored, a haggard, sunburnt face, and eyes sunken and bloodshot. As he smiled, his thin lips drew completely away from his white teeth.

"I am so very sorry, Mr. Roper!" Rose really tried to look both sorry and kind. "But I think—I am not sure—— Yes, I am completely full up. Look!"

Roper took the card and scrutinised it. Then he turned a glance of ill-concealed annoyance upon Laughton.

"'C. L., C. L., C. L.!'" he reiterated sardonically. "And here again, and again! Someone, I see, believes in the old adage of making hay while the sun shines! But really, really, Miss Petherway, I—I——"

Rose had felt Claud's arm stiffen ominously. She hastened to clear the thundery air.

"Yes, this is Mr. Claud Laughton! Claud, do you know Mr. Roper?—from London, I think Tom told me. Mr. Laughton is a very old friend of mine."

The two men shook hands perfunctorily. Claud's steady eyes had never left Roper's face since the latter had intruded himself upon them; and now he was still studying the gaunt visage before him.

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully, "I somehow think we must have met before, sir. I have just a faint recollection of—of——"

"Hardly possible, sir!" Roper rejoined quickly. "Only just returned from India, you know; and been away for a great many years. Looking at the old country a little before—before I—— Oh! D——!"

A tremendous thump between the shoulders had drawn

the unmannerly exclamation from him. Before he could turn, an arm was wound tightly round his neck. Young Tom Petherway thrust himself into the midst of the group; and would have included Laughton in his hilarious embrace, but Claud's quiet dexterity foiled him.

"Well met, well met!" Tom cried. "East and West united—the great Panjandrum of Bahurba—what is it?—and the renowned Wizard of the Bee-Barn and general all-round, incomprehensible Mystery! Come! we must brew a magic potion together! Rose, we won't be five minutes, if you don't mind——"

"Not now, Tom. Your sister and I are dancing this quadrille, and——"

"Well, you will, Roper? Ah! I thought so! You are not the man to let a woman stand between you and your duty! Come along, my dear old chap!—come into my snuggery. Life is short, and death is long; so let's all be merry and bright!"

Tom dragged Roper off, and Claud hurried Rose away to the end of the room, where one of the quadrille-sets still needed a couple. The invisible piano, in its thicket of palms and arum lilies, again fell blithely to work. From their look-out post in the chimney-corner, Farmer Petherway and his wife surveyed the scene, their round, ruddy faces reflecting all the mirth and jollity before them. The old farmer laid an affectionate hand upon his wife's shoulder, and presently his fat forefinger travelled to her cheek.

"I mind well the day," he observed, "when you and me wouldn't ha' been content to bide outside o' it all; eh, Martha? Fegs! what a gell you was fer pokerin'! But Lor'! there bean't any real dancin' now; 'tis all that slow meanderin' round and round, like yows with the staggers! Ah! we old 'uns could show 'em summat, couldn't us, my dear?"

He fell into a brown study, from which a furious clapping of hands, signalling the end of the quadrille figure, awoke him with a start.

"Tom, I can't see anywheres," he said, gazing round the room. "Nor yet that Stavisham feller. But there be Rosie! What a pair they do make, to be sure an' all!"

Mrs. Petherway's big, dull, tranquil eyes, like discs of blue wedgwood china set in the smooth rotundity of her face, had been wandering in the same direction. It was some time before she answered him.

"Mind ye, Petherway!" she said at last suddenly. "I'll never dictate to gell o' mine in these matters. A free choice she shall ha', as her mother had afore her; an' may she do as well, says I. 'Tis true as we ha' allers thought as the young doctor might—— But, sakes alive! if a young man, of his own free will, goes and puts thousands of miles of sea and land atween hisself an' his chances, 'a can blame no one for what comes o't!"

The two were silent awhile. And then, at the same instant, each put into troubled words, the same idea.

"Where be Tom, I wonder?" complained the old farmer. "I'd better look around, an' see if I can find 'un."

And Mrs. Petherway:

"Tom's no business away so long from his friends! I do wish, my dear, you'd go and fetch him."

To Claud and Rose, throughout the hours that followed, time seemed to take to itself wings like the wind. Thanks to Rose's adroitness in deflecting small agencies to the furtherance of desired great events, they were thrown constantly together, either as partners or participants in the same sets. Laughton had been a dull clod indeed if he had failed to mark the favour extended to him at every turn. "I am so happy now!" she had whispered to him, as they fell into place together after her deliver-

ance from Roper; and involuntarily he had echoed her meaning tone, as he answered her, "And I am happy too!" At this Rose had swung round, her lazy grey eyes challenging him under their drooping lids. He had met her glance point-blank with his own composed, serious one; and was surprised to see hers fail and fall after an instant's quivering opposition. The long gold lashes swept down upon the sudden carmine of her cheek. All the figure through, she looked up no more; nor could he win another direct glance from her until the dance was ended, though her voice rippled on happily in his ear, her fingers closed upon his with all their old friendly warmth. To Laughton, this was Rose Petherway in an entirely new guise; and he came sharply to his senses to ponder over the phenomenon.

He would be very careful, he said to himself—careful both for her sake and his own. Claud had outlived conceit, and the boy's unthinking exultation in conquest. Yet to blink the patent fact, that this huge-limbed, healthy young goddess harboured more than a kindness for himself, and subtly intended him to know it, would have been folly indeed. Given the fact, Claud pondered to himself, as he swept her round in the dance, covertly amused, even while he was charmed, at her averted glance and her mantling discomposure—given that unsteadying, perilous fact as regarded a man of thirty-six and a girl of barely twenty-one, what was the right course to pursue, when, in the man's own mind, the situation had already been grasped like a nettle and so painlessly annihilated?

His thoughts went back to the encounter of the morning, the reverie and the resolution it had involved, as he stood stirring the General's pot in the sun-flooded silence of the Bee-Barn.

If such a spell had almost overswayed him when in his wide-awake, normal mood, what was likely to befall him

here under the glamour and seduction of soft lights, dreamy music, the wine of Epernay, and the still headier wine of a beautiful woman's proffered tenderness?

He shuddered a little. Old harsh memories, that ceaseless labour and preoccupation had always managed to keep dumb and out of sight, uprose now and cried to him. His thoughts, for all his set determination, travelled back over the toilful years in Whinbury, vaulted the barrier he had so manfully built behind them, cowered agonising, despairing, on the brink of a great darkness beyond—not dark with the shadow of his own guilt indeed—but a darkness that was the one abiding, invincible terror of his lonely life. This nerved him for the moment as nothing else could have done. He would be very careful, he said to himself again; for his own sake, as well as hers.

To have lived to middle-age, and still, in spite of all, be cherishing an ideal—that was a hope at least. Love for Love—in his heart he had always laid down that one unalterable condition for wedded life; and now he could never depart from it. To give less than true love to any truly loving woman, were dishonour, infamy. He looked down at the diamond pendant lifting and subsiding so near to his own threshing heart; he looked up from it to the face with its milk and roses, its curtained eyes, its crown of pearls and gold; and was not deceived. What she would give him—all that a nature such as hers could ever give him—would be earthly, perishable; fit counterpart for the best he could ever give her in return. "A ripe plum!"—the ignoble phrase of the morning came back to his lips now, but in bitter self-condemnation. Why not his hand to the gathering? Well: because, in spite of all that lay behind—all past error, blindness, suffering—it was still a clean hand, the hand of a man.

But at the end of the quadrille, Rose Petherway re-

covered the use of all her armoury; and Claud began to be conscious of a new stress and impetus in affairs.

For the next few dances they were separated; could only exchange looks from afar, or snatch a fleeting, passing word. Several young men and women in the company took lasting umbrage from one or the other of the pair that night. Claud, waltzing with the eldest Miss McCray, had his eyes so often over the wrong shoulder, that he was more than once called acidly to account. Rose answered a lambent query from young Joye, the son of the Stavisham corn-dealer, as to the condition of her father's oats, by apparently adjuring him to "keep up heart, it won't be long!" When Laughton had dutifully picked out Miss Dittemia Welby from the sitting throng, and had delighted that elderly, florid heavy-weight by romping her through every figure of the lancers, he spoilt it all by a too precipitate abandonment in the end, in response to a white arm's beckoning.

Rose had left her partner, young George Love, the tenant of the neighbouring Ambledown farm, standing speechless with indignation in the centre of the apartment; and Laughton met her in mid-space eagerly.

"Only one more, and then the supper-dance!" she said, her eyes meeting his now with all the old sulky, tender surety. "It has been laid in the corn-store; and you are to take me over by the great bin, where the little tables are, among the palms."

He had but a moment to dally with her. Forthwith she was claimed and borne away by a rustic stripling, who might have gone with his twin-brother into the scale against her, and never moved the beam.

It would have been very unlike the traditional hospitality of the Petherways, if supper in the corn-store had proved anything else than the chief event of that memorable night at Whinbury Farm. From the leafy corner, where

at length he found himself snugly ensconced with Rose, Claud looked out on a scene that honestly gladdened his heart. The great lofty place was crowded with a jovial company, gathered about tables that fairly groaned under their weight of good cheer. A medley of talk and laughter, clatter of knives and forks, the incessant fusillade of champagne-corks and jingle of glasses; crackers exploding everywhere, amidst shrill cries of fearsome feminine delight; Farmer Petherway's stentorian voice toasting his guests whenever he could catch an eye, or haling up more gilt-necked bottles from the cellar; the scramble of the serving-maids to and fro under Mrs. Petherway's calm but stimulating presence; the many-coloured lights, the fragrance of the flowers contending with that of the generous fare, the sparkle of crystal and silver-ware from end to end of the long tables—Laughton sat looking on at it all like a man in a dream; like a man in a dream listening to a queer sort of eastern symphony, where all was harmonious incoherence save for the meaning in one clear sweet voice.

He was to be careful, he warned himself over and over again. Yet nature had never intended him for a monastic life, and he was not going to play the glum ascetic in the midst of all this harmless, reckless jollity. He laughed with Rose, clinked glasses with her, met her gay sallies with his own inimitable, half-ironic wit. Out of a cracker she pulled a gilt wedding-ring, and he insisted on her wearing it; and when there came to light a mock Order of the Garter, blue sash and all, she leant over him and fastened it across his breast. Her white arms were a long while about him, and he suffered it willingly.

"Of course, you ought to have been a King!" she said merrily. And he answered her, "I am a King; and in my kingdom there are millions of people, all with wings; but all—alas!—women!"

"Why 'alas!'?" Rose asked him quickly.

Farmer Petherway was on his legs, lifting a full bumper to Claud. Claud rose and drank, copying the old man laughingly as he saw the glass inverted.

"Why 'alas!'?" Rose asked again, looking at him seriously. "Why do you say that to me? I, at least, know that you are not really the woman-hater that people say you are. But what makes you live this life, Claud, all alone? Do you never think how much happier people are who do the common accepted things, and study to be just like their neighbours? Gracious! there is Tom shouting for you now!"

Tom Petherway showed a scarlet face from the far end of the table. He was standing up, a brimming glass raised over his head.

"A toast, a toast, gentlemen!" he was crying. "And ladies too! Here's to our distinguished neighbour and friend, Mr. Mystery-Laughton! No, no, Claud! None of your sips and nods for me! Drink right out, man! Rose, see that he does his duty!"

"I live a lonely life, Rose," Laughton said, as soon as the hubbub of this had subsided, "for the simple reason that I am a lonely man. Is not that 'common accepted cause and effect'? What else could my neighbour do, under the circumstances?"

Rose turned the mock-ring on her finger thoughtfully.

"Oh! you goose! you goose!" she cried at last, sagely wagging her head. "They may well call you a mystery! Why, how do you think the world has managed to go on all these thousands of years if——"

She stopped, for a general rising was now taking place in the assembly, led by Mrs. Petherway. It was time to return to the ball-room. Taking their rank in the throng, Claud and Rose went back to the house. At the door of the kitchen, Rose was whisked off by an impatient

partner; the music started; Claud was left in his old station, at his old occupation of looking on at the scene.

A glance at his programme showed a great blank now until a string of R.P.'s began and continued to the end. Claud heaved a sigh of relief, for he wanted to think. He watched a couple of the dances through, his eyes dreamily following one spot of cool pearl-grey that passed and repassed before him amidst the whirl of rainbow hues. And then he suddenly recalled to mind his promise to the rector. He looked about the kitchen. Tom Petherway was nowhere to be seen. Laughton decided to make a tour of the rooms, and if he could find Tom, and could make an opportunity for talk with him, perhaps—— Claud had already gone a few steps into the obscurity of the corridor when a light touch on the shoulder restrained him. Turning quickly, he saw Rose.

"Oh! I am so hot, and tired, and out of breath, Claud!" she cried, furiously fanning herself. "I have begged off the next two stupid square things, and I want to walk a little somewhere in the cool. It is a beautifully still night: let us go out for a while and count the stars together."

She laughed—the deep rich laugh like the sudden clang of bells that always made Laughton serious.

"Not like that!" he said decidedly, with a look at her gown. "April nights are treacherous. Get a shawl, or something."

Rose disappeared for a moment, returning with a long dark cloak about her. They evaded the straggling company in the passage-ways, and were soon out in the fragrant star-lit gloom of the garden.

"Let us go through the little wicket," Rose said presently, "and up the Home Croft. We can see nothing among all these trees. Oh! the grass will be dry as tinder, so do not worry."

They wandered up the gentle incline until they reached

the fence at its brow, whence they had a view down into the deep combe beyond. Rose settled her arms comfortably on the rail, and Laughton came to rest at her side. He lit a cigarette. For some minutes neither spoke. Behind them were the twinkling lights of the house of revelry; the low reverberation of the dancing and the sound of the music creeping up to them on the slow night-wind. Before them the ground fell abruptly, and far below they could dimly make out the squares of the sheep-folds, and a lantern moving amongst them. The clamour of the lambs and ewes uprose to them, distance-softened and subdued—a quiet flood of sound wholly in harmony with the wide, star-strewn darkness overhead.

Rose gathered her cloak about her. A few inches of the fence-rail separated the pair as they leant over together; the interval gradually lessened on Rose's side, and finally disappeared.

"But the lonely people, you know, are not only those who live by themselves, Claud," she said, as though but a moment had elapsed since their talk in the supper-room. "You will not believe it; but I am lonely too—sometimes very lonely indeed."

She saw the glowing cigarette-end quiver with his silent laughter.

"What! you, Rose? You?—with all your chances, your life here in a big, busy household, any pleasure you fancy at a moment's call, and everything that——"

He shut his lips on his cigarette and puffed away resolutely. But she took him up.

"Everything, what? Ah! I know what you were going to say! Everything that money can buy me—was it not? Yes, it is true, Claud! Even if father had nothing, I should still have more than enough in my own right. But what can it really bring me? Oh! there are some things that a woman——"

She broke off in her turn, as abruptly as he. Claud revolved himself upon the rail so that they now confronted each other. She could not see his face, but she knew he was strangely moved. He seemed to be fighting against something. At length he spoke, slowly, ruminatively.

"Money?—yes; it can bring a woman into great danger, and a man too, Rose. It may make them forget, or lose, just those things in life that alone are worth having. But it is always the man who is to blame really, for that."

"You mean——" she hesitated.

"My dear! I am a good deal older than you, and I have seen a lot of that kind of thing. Do you not understand the danger I mean? Money—it is so likely to attract the wrong sort of man or woman, one who by nature prefers the material dross to the true gold. Then the monied one is in great danger of losing all in the end. Or a man may esteem a woman, but because of her money, may feel that his real motive will be misinterpreted; and then, if he have pride as well as honour, he may never speak out, and both will be eternal losers. Come! let us go back to the house; I am afraid you will get a chill out here."

She completely ignored his last words and his hasty movement. She gazed steadily on into the grey gulf before her.

"Be sure of this much, Claud," she said after a while, earnestly now, and under her breath. "If the woman is a real woman, and not a vain, purse-proud fool, she will be in no sort of doubt when it is the real man she has to deal with. Falsity may deceive her, but truth never. The wrong man may win her, but the right man will have his full chance."

"But suppose"—his words came vehemently, almost passionately—"suppose the man, for all his rightness,

has only esteem, no more than a plain, honourable affection, to give her—what then ? "

Again the old laugh rang out in the stillness, awaking an echo through the grey hills.

" Look at me, Claud ! "

She was standing erect now, her head thrown back, her bare arms raised, holding the cloak outspread behind her. In the faint starlight Claud saw before him just a dim beautiful form, like the marble statue of a woman enshrined in a sombre niche.

" Well : I am looking ! " he said, as indeed he was, with all his straining eyes.

" If I am typical of women with money who are very lonely, have no fear for us. We shall know ! I know now ! "

Suddenly he took her hand, both her hands, in his own trembling warm ones. And then a harsh note, a sound curiously at variance with the blithe murmur of music and voices, struck up to them from the house below. It was an angry shout, followed by one angrier still, and then an incoherent tumult that gradually died away into silence. Moved by the same thought, Claud and Rose turned together, and hurriedly descended the hill.

" It came from the card-room ! " Rose whispered anxiously. " It was Tom, I know ; and, I think, that hateful man ! Let us go round past the window."

" They are quiet enough now, at all events," said Claud, as they threaded their way through the shrubbery of the garden, and at length stood together by the open window, silently peering in.

Only one of the green tables was occupied, and at it sat two people intent on their game. Tom's back was turned towards them. Opposite him sat Roper, showing a scowling purple face. But both were mute and peaceable enough, exhibiting no other sign of the late stormy disagreement. Claud drew Rose away.

"They have no need for us, nor we for them," he said contemptuously. "And hark! there is 'Sir Roger' beginning! Spur up, Rose, and we'll be in at the death!"

Later by an hour Claud stood at the door of the Bee-Barn, feeling under the lintel for the key that always hung there upon its nail. He let himself quietly in, groped for the candle, flung himself wearily into a chair. A gnat sang shrilly past his ear; the General's snores reverberated in the beams of the ceiling; down in the village the first chanticleer was heralding the darkest hour before the day. For half an hour or more Claud sat staring into space, his chin upon his hand. And then he sprang up resolutely, took the candle, and started to climb the stair to his bed.

"Great God! what does it matter?" he cried aloud in his perplexed heart. "What am I whining about?—what have I to regret? A man of thirty-six still cherishing a boy's featherbrain ideal? Pshaw! What a fool I have always been! But to-morrow—— !"

It was the morrow that he longed for now, yet it was the morrow that he feared. For a long hour he lay tossing restlessly, asking himself the one question, but answering it in two opposing ways.

"Ought I to tell her?—yes!" and "Ought I to tell her?—no!"—the two phrases kept rising to his mind in regular succession. And then, as the grey light was stealing into his chamber, and the larks beginning their song of dawn upon the hills, and he had all but given up the problem despairfully, an idea struck him.

"What I want is another clear, strong head on the matter—someone who knows the next world as well as this. But who can I trust to—— By the Lord Harry!—yes! There is only one on the whole earth! I'll go and put the case to little Lucy Brent!"

CHAPTER V

"MOORINGS"

THERE was a house in Whinbury, standing just at the foot of the green, with which, and with the lives of whose inhabitants, Laughton's warmest interests had long been identified.

"Old Gammer Weekses'," the house used to be called, and was yet thus spoken of by the older village-folk; but to Claud, as a comparative new-comer, and to all the young generation, it was known as "The Moorings"—the home of aged Captain Brent; of his daughter Lucy, the little school-mistress; and at rare, irregular, and very brief intervals, of Stephen, his son, a surgeon in one of the great steamship lines, trading to the Far East.

After the death of its original occupier, the old house had stood untenanted for years, given over to the sparrows and starlings and martins. Ivy smothered it to the chimney-tops, and all but obscured its cobweb-wreathed panes. The garden had grown into an impenetrable wilderness. The paddock in its rear had come to be the recognised playground for all the rougher Whinbury boys. But the boldest of them ventured thither only in broad day; and after dark there was scarce one belonging to the village—man, woman, or child—who did not quicken step in passing the sombre, secret old place, nor slacken again until a passage had been safely negotiated.

There was no uncanny legend regarding it, nor any suspicion of dark, unpunished deeds of violence committed by the mild old dame who had been born, and whose whole life had been spent within its four walls. But the very intangibility and indefiniteness of the popular feeling towards the place gave a blank draft to credulity. With nothing certain to believe, it was easy to conjecture everything. And so the little, low, hump-roofed house came to be looked at askance, or spoken of with a shrug and a shudder, even by those who, as cronies of its former tenant, had been familiar with it, inside and out, during the best part of their lives.

The appearance of strangers in Whinbury was then, as now, so rare an event as to attract inquiring faces to every window and door. Even busy Mrs. March herself had wiped the suds from her hands and gone as far as her garden-gate, to look up the street after the three sauntering figures—the white-haired, bent, old gentleman, the little lady, and the smart youth—he was then scarce more—in his sea-going surgeon's clothes. Up at the "Five Shearers" that night, the trio formed the principal subject of conversation. Mrs. Lorrie had made tea for the party, had answered many inquiries during their brief stay, and was full of wondering speculation as to the outcome of their visit. What did a shoulder-knot of gold braid on a bit of scarlet flannel denote?—she asked of Peavey. An admiral? And while the clerk was considering words to cloak his ignorance, she launched out on her favourite topic.

"Th' leddy, 'a wur pretty-like, but a deal oulder'n he. A good ten year atween th' pair, I'd reckon, not to be onkind to her. But, Lorey-me! ye caan't never jedge! Belike they're as happy together as a pair o'—pair o'—— Peavey, what be they little green beasties as Miss Dittimy had gi'en to her laast Lady-time?"

"Brazilian love-burds, warn't ut?"

"Ay! 'tis so! An' they'll come an' live in ould Gammer Weekses' afore long, you maark me: 'tis all cut out for us, sure as eggs is eggs!"

And so it came about. Within a few weeks the ancient house had been made fit again for human tenancy, and the Brents were installed there—the stooping, white-bearded old captain to dodder and blink and brood all day in the garden; Lucy to take up the vacant post of school-marm; and Stephen, after a few days' frantic carpet-laying and picture-hanging, to disappear once more into the void of the seas.

All that was years and years ago, but to this day Whinbury had never been able quite to make up its mind over Captain Brent. From the first all agreed that Miss Lucy had a bad time with him, that he needed a deal of keeping up. Clearly it was not drink, nor bodily lesion; although his gait was halting and slow, and he walked with a stick. Whinbury would have liked to ponder over his case at leisure, to have chewed the cud of various theories over the firesides, to have been left a few months at least of unelucidated speculation to help the long winter through. But the old captain himself was the speedy means of his own dethronement from the nebulous glory wherein all would willingly have kept him enshrouded. He had an itch, it seemed, for making confidants. He would lean over his gate for hours in the sunshine, and whenever he could lure a passer-by into his garden, under pretence of showing him some early blossoming plant or forward patch of vegetables, the same little drama was sure to ensue.

It was thus Laughton made his first acquaintance with the inside of "Moorings." As he was striding by one bright, bleak February afternoon, the old gentleman accosted him, and was soon holding open the gate for

him to pass through. Claud presently found himself in the little parlour of the house, a blue-veined, trembling hand pointing out various objects of seafaring interest. Laughton at once realised that he was about to know the tears of things.

"That, sir," said the old captain, indicating one of the many framed photographs on the walls, "that was the first ship I ever took to sea. And all these—everyone of them has been under my command, at one time or other. There is not blue water in the whole world I have not sailed over in one or other of them during my fifty years of service. And look at this! That portrait was painted when I became Commodore of the Line. It was a gift from the Directors. Ah! that was when I was at the top of the tree!"

It was all happening almost word for word, just as Claud had heard it related at second-hand from others whom the old man had inveigled in. He waited for the sequel, and it was not long in coming. As Claud gazed at the portrait with its smiling, lordly, confidant face and its elaborate gold-laced uniform, so unlike the shabby shadow of a man beside him, a hand was laid upon his arm. He was gently drawn away to a corner where a picture hung behind a curtain of black.

"We are to be neighbours, sir"—the captain's hollow, gentle voice sank to a whisper—"and I should not like you to labour under any misconception of my true present state. I—I feel I ought to tell you something, in the strictest confidence, of course. Sir, I can rely—can I not?—upon your never divulging to any other living soul what I am now going to say?"

Laughton gave his word, as so many, gentle and simple, had done before him in the same little room during the last few weeks. The gaunt arm went up—tremblingly drew aside the curtain. Claud saw the photograph of a

great four-funnelled, many-decked ship, and under it a name he well remembered. The old man's arms rose tremblingly above his head.

"Only a few years ago; and now—Lost, lost! Gone to the bottom in fifty fathom of stormy sea! Half a million of good money wasted, lost for ever! Oh, sir! think of it; and then—then pity me!"

He turned and clutched at Claud's sleeve, the tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks.

"But no lives, thank God!—nor a single letter! I saved them all, every soul and every mail-bag! Ay! and in such a sea! But I knew from the time we struck, I was a broken man, sir, a doomed man, wrecked and lost like the ship."

"How did it happen?" asked Claud, under his breath. The old man had lapsed into sudden silence, a silence not to be borne.

"Storm, fog, and an uncharted reef!"

The words rose in a shrill, feebly passionate wail that echoed through the room, drawing a twang of grotesque sympathy from a guitar in the corner. And then Laughton looked at the old man with a gasp of surprise. In a moment he had changed; he was smiling vacuously to himself, guttering a little at the mouth, rhythmically wagging his head.

"What was I saying, sir? Oh! the snowdrops! Yes, come and see them by all means. You cannot tell what incessant thought and skill is needed for successful flower-and-vegetable culture. Do you know, sir, I lay awake for hours last night thinking whether it would be best to sow 'British Marvel' or 'Mrs. Joshua Juggins' peas."

For an hour or more the nightingale had been singing in the green brier-hedge, and Lucy Brent had listened as she sewed.

It was pleasant to sit by the open window at the end of a tiring day, screened by drooping wands of honeysuckle from the view of the passers-by, unobserved herself, yet all observing. Busily Lucy's needle journeyed down the seam. It was simple, mechanical work, needing but a glance and a thought between-whiles. Most of the time her eyes and mind were directed to other things—the song of the nightingale, the yellowing of the sunlight on the distant hills, the chance words and gestures of the people who came and went across her field of view.

Everyone in Whinbury spoke of "little" Lucy Brent, yet would have been puzzled, perhaps, to say off-hand why the adjective was always coupled with her name. In stature, she was scarce below the middle height; and to regard her neat figure as merely inclining to plumpness, would have been to employ an obvious euphemism. For all that, however, the word was the only word to fit the case. It seemed to sum her up—manners, looks, and temperament—all in two syllables. She was quiet, precise, diminutive in her ways; her voice was low, yet extraordinarily melodious and clear; almost of the same shade of pale brown were her eyes and hair, the latter centrally parted and carried down over her ears in two undulating sweeps, plentifully lined with silver; a half-smile hovered perpetually about her small oval face, she laughed never; she took an uninflated view of all affairs, choosing ever the middle course and suspecting extremes; she was herself punctual to a second and timely in deed, yet was strangely indulgent of other folks' delay or procrastination; she was at once independent and diffident; in short, and in a word, she was little Lucy Brent.

The nightingale sang on, and Lucy stitched and pondered, or gazed out upon the strolling couples on the green. The light on the hill-top took on a deeper golden

tinge. At the far end of the long, low tunnel of a room, a French window stood open, and now and again Lucy glanced that way to note the bent form of the old captain pottering aimlessly amidst his flowers.

Footsteps came and passed on. One by one Lucy checked off the regular members of the parlour-company lounging in disjointed procession towards the inn. At length a footfall drew into the quiet of the street, that brought her suddenly from general to particular attention. Lucy knew the sound of it well. Would it stop at the gate, as she expected, hoped at least, it might? A peep through the honeysuckle changed this hope into real expectancy, and then to full conviction. Hurriedly pulling off her eye-glasses, she concealed them in her pocket, and sprang to open the door.

Laughton noted the tiny red depressions on each side of Lucy's small, delicately aquiline nose, as he had often noted them; and understood their cause. Everyone in Whinbury knew that little Miss Brent was getting short-sighted, though Lucy herself cherished that fact as a secret fast locked up in her own voluminous breast, and Claud at least was safe from undeceiving her.

He came into the room, and took the arm-chair pushed into the window for him, and the two old friends sat for a moment or two regarding one another in a genial silence. For a wonder, Lucy was the first to break this mute interchange of amenities by spoken words. She began with a sound that came as near to a downright laugh as anything he had ever heard from her.

"You a hermit!" she quizzed him, her eyes dancing merrily. "Why! you were the gayest of all at the farm last night! My dear Claud! How you can sit there now with that dignified, responsible look on your face, after all I saw—well! Men are puzzles!"

Throughout a long and busy day Laughton had been

a creature mentally obsessed by a single idea, and now he had neither the desire nor the power to fritter time away on immaterial topics. At the general leave-taking, no word as to a second meeting had been possible between him and Rose; but he knew he would be expected, eagerly awaited indeed, at the farm that night. There was much he wanted to say to Lucy Brent, and little time in which to say it. He came at once to the object of his visit.

"Lucy," said he, "you and I have known each other for a great many years, and many's the piece of good advice you have given me. Well, I want your counsel now. I want it very badly. Put on your considering-cap, or get into the priestly side of the confessional-box, which ever you will; and be very serious while I try to piece together what I have to say."

The sewing-needle poised in mid-air. Lucy scanned Claud's face attentively. But her eyes danced as merrily as ever.

"Are you sure you have not come to the wrong house, Claud?" she asked him. "I have read something very much like that in the *Family*——"

He reached forth a brown hand and laid it gently upon her sleeve.

"It is about something, Lucy, that may, or may not, change the whole course of my life, and which may give me happiness, or deprive me of it for ever. There!, now will you be serious?"

Her smile faded. She flushed a little. The busy needle fell again to its work.

"Go on," she said, gravely enough now. For a moment or two Claud stared out of the window.

"If," he began at last, hesitatingly, "if a man thought of—of asking a woman to marry him, Lucy, and—and he was quite free, you know, honourably free, to do so;

but there was something in his past life that—that might certainly be thought by some people—I mean a sort of bygone mixture of romance, folly, and tragedy, which had left him high and dry and lonely in the world—no inconvenient ties or anything of that sort—nothing but a spoilt life and very bitter memories, perhaps a heart thoroughly soured and sickened. . . . Are you beginning to understand me, my dear? Well, here's the point. Ought that man to tell the woman?—make a clean breast of it all to her; give her a chance of backing out, if she wished to, before it was too late?"

He was still staring out at the distant hillside, rosy now in the light of the setting sun. The nightingale in the brier-hedge sang her sweetest and weariest. Lucy stole a side-glance at him. The needle clicked on.

"Well: yes, and no," she answered at length. "It depends a great deal, Claud, on the nature of the thing that is dead and gone, as you say, but still obviously very much alive and present. I do not wish to know more than you wish me to know, but I cannot possibly form a judgment one way or the other, on the little you have told me."

"And so I might have guessed!" he cried in sudden desperation. "Well, bear with me, Lucy—will you?—while I get to work with the muck-rake; stir up all the festering filth again after so many clean years, and perhaps all to no good. But I know you are right, my dear; you always are."

He put his elbow on the little work-table, and rested his cheek upon his hand. Out in the street there was still a brave light abroad, but in the room the dusk was slowly gathering. He turned to her.

"Take a good look at me, Lucy!"

Involuntarily her hand felt for the glasses in her pocket, but drew back again.

"Would you think," he went on, "that there had ever been a time in my life when I was only twenty-four? I mean, can you conceive of me as just a mad young fool about London; sowing his wild oats, as they call it; that is to say, drinking more than was good for him, getting mixed up with all sorts of undesirable people, and into all sorts of scrapes. Can you think of me like that, Lucy?"

"I can think of you," she answered, after a moment's thought, "as touching pitch, but never——"

"Thank you, my dear!" he interrupted her gratefully. "That does me good. And you are not so far out either, praise the saints! But here is a worse poser for you. What would you think of that young fool as becoming entangled with, and finally marrying, a sixth-rate music-hall singer; leading a brief, but awful life with her; and then, in the midst of instituting proceedings for divorce by reason of her intemperance and profligacy, being inexpressibly shocked and stunned at her suicide—all in one short year?"

He had his hand upon his brows, but through his parted fingers he narrowly watched her. He saw the tears start into her eyes.

"Oh, my dear Claud!"

The words were wrung from her in utter amazement, in compassionate sorrow. She got the pince-nez out now, and bravely fitted them in place, for she must see him clearly at any cost. He was looking straight out at the rosy April evening.

"There you have it, Lucy, in a nutshell—or a bomb-shell, whichever you like. That awful year—well, I think it wore something completely out inside me. Afterwards I hung on at my work for a few miserable, solitary months—I was a journalist, you know, on one of the big London dailies—but I was done, done; and well I knew it.

It had been too much for me. The horrible life, and the sickening tragedy that so suddenly closed it, and the scandal all over the town—can you wonder that a day came at last when a longing seized me to put an end to it all, to disappear from my old life and all its associations; to go away somewhere and live among strangers where I could get back a little of my lost courage, construct an entirely new plan of life, and perhaps come at last to forget, even to be peacefully happy in a sort of spavined, broken-winded way? So there and then—it was one gloomy, foggy winter's morning—I went round to my bank and drew out all I had in the world, a few hundred pounds; tramped to the nearest railway station, and took train for the first distant place that met my eyes on the time-table. And now that you know all, my dear friend, now you must answer the question I put to you in the beginning. Must I tell the woman, Lucy? Must I rake up the whole revolting story from its grave, simply for an idea, and perhaps distress her, and degrade her thought of me for ever, when no real wrong would be done to anybody by my silence? Help me, help me, my friend of many years!"

He was deeply moved, more deeply than she had ever known him: if he had thought of looking at her then, he, too, might have seen in her an agitation—new, indeed, and deeper even than his story, sad as it was, could ever have invoked. But she kept the needle steadily to its task.

"There is only one answer, Claud," she said after a while, "and that the one you do not want, I am afraid. Yes, you must tell her; it is the only thing in honour and in right."

"I must tell her? Why, why?"

The words broke vehemently from him. Little Miss Brent slowly shook her head.

"You do not love her, Claud. If you loved her, you could never be in doubt."

He was on his feet now.

"Good heavens, Lucy!" he cried, "a man of my age, who has gone through all I have gone through—what has he to do with love? Are not respect, an honest regard, a pleasurable looking-forward to life with her, as much as any woman can expect from a man in these matter-of-fact times? Love!—there is no such thing now in the world!"

She answered him, flushed and faltering.

"Yes, there is, Claud. I have seen it, and I know. Did you ever hear of the big diamond that passed the first years of its life as a pretty, common stone—the mere plaything of a child? But when chance brought it into the hands of one who knew, and it came to be cut and polished, it was worth a king's ransom. Well, a woman's heart is just like that. You never know, till love comes and cuts and polishes it, how it will shine. So a man who marries a woman without love, does himself and her a bitter wrong. Haven't you told me so yourself a hundred times?"

He had, indeed, and well he remembered it. He picked up his hat and cane from the table.

"Very well then, Lucy," he said decisively. "It shall be so. I have nothing to be really ashamed of, have I? It will be an awful job, but—but— I'll go straight and tell her now, Lucy, while your good influence is still upon me. Stephen—what a lucky man he is to have a sister like you!"

She went with him as far as the garden-gate. There he lingered as though there were something more he wished to say to her. But a figure was approaching on the footway, dark against the streaming sunset light. They waited until it should have gone by.

"Here comes your new competitor, I think," said Lucy, shading her eyes. "The daughter of the poor old bee-master. You remember her, do you not? Good-evening, Elisabel!"

"Good evening, Miss Brent!"

At the sound of the fresh young voice Claud wheeled sharply round.

The girl turned for a moment, exchanged a dozen words with her old teacher, and then passed on. Claud stood looking after the tall, graceful, black-robed figure. Involuntarily he caught his breath.

"That is never old Caleb March's daughter, is it, Lucy? What! the one they call 'Lisbel?—the girl who went away to be a shop-assistant in Marshminster?"

He took a long stride out into the middle of the street. There he stood silently watching Elisabel until she vanished round the distant corner. Lucy smiled at the astounded face he showed, as he came slowly back to her.

"Yes, she has changed, has she not, Claud? A pale, over-grown slip of a girl turned in a few years into a remarkably fine and pretty woman. All the village is talking about her good looks. But be careful, Claud! She is dangerous! They say she has declared a holy war on the Bee-Barn, and means to annihilate you if she can. So beware!"

CHAPTER VI

THE HEART OF CLAUD LAUGHTON

ON leaving the Brent's cottage, Claud walked slowly away down the high-street, immersed in thought. So preoccupied was he, so little aware of the ground he traversed, that he overshot by a hundred yards or so the side-lane leading to the farm, and must hark back to pick up the trail. And then, though some half-mile of tree-shadowed road remained yet to be covered, the big white gates of Whinbury farmhouse seemed to start up in his path like ghosts out of the ruddy dusk, when he was scarce conscious of having gone a dozen strides. The latch of the wicket-door clicked sharply in his hand. The noise brought Laughton suddenly out of his reverie, and to the recognition of a startling fact.

"Here," he said to himself amazedly, "here I am, going to ask one woman to marry me; and all my thoughts are busy with another woman—one who had no existence for me half an hour ago!"

Softly now he let the latch fall back in its place, and turned away to consider this momentous thing. Unconsciously he plodded back over the way he had come. He was dimly aware of some dark upright shadows resembling trees, that flitted by him on either hand. A double row of bulky, irregular objects, vaguely suggesting houses, and a few insignificant forms that might have

been men and women, passed him in the same direction. A drowsy ripple of water grew upon his ears. All in a moment, it seemed—remembering no step that brought him there—Claud found himself leaning over the parapet of the bridge that spanned the river at the foot of the village-street.

"What is the matter with me?" he asked himself aloud. "Why am I shaking like a jelly? What has become of all the people on earth, except—except one?"

He took a long grip of the moss-grown coping with both hands, staring straight before him into the deepening twilight. And then Claud Laughton fell broad awake: the very world seemed to stop still in space as the possibility of things forced itself upon him.

"At last, at last! Has it come to me in the end—after all these dreary years?"

He started at the sound of his own voice, so hoarse and unfamiliar it seemed. The laugh that followed hard upon the spoken words, rang stranger still.

"No, no! It is only more folly!—more boy's nonsense that will be gone and forgotten in a day! But, Lord! what a fluster and sweat I am in!"

He took a turn up and down the bridge, trying to calm himself. Presently he came back to the old spot, and fitted his elbows again into the mossy niche. He looked up the glimmering stretch of water-way. It was long past the hour of sunset. Only in the west a deep red stain lingered low down on the earth-line. Behind him it was already night. As the light failed, he watched the stars piercing its lustrous curtain one by one; and every new point of light that came in the heaven brought him a little more self-control and power for clearer thought.

"But what am I really building on?" he questioned himself. "Three short minutes at most by a strange woman's side, and she regardless of me, never a word or

look my way. Well, what could happen to a grown man in that brief time? What did I hear, and feel, and see?"

Resolutely he strove to grasp at that much of naked sober fact amidst the flood-tide of emotion which had so suddenly carried him off his feet.

He had heard plain, everyday words spoken by one of as humble birth as any in the village. There had stood before him the figure of a girl, tall and straight in its simple mourning gown. He had looked upon a pale face set in a frame of dark, abundant hair; a pair of red lips firm held together; eyes, big and steady and calm, whose depths of colour had baffled him at first, yet revealed the wonder of their deep, royal blue at a second and closer scrutiny.

He had looked upon these, he had listened to the voice, for but a moment's space, it seemed; and straightway a new heart, a new mind, a whole new man had been created in the world; the old Claud Laughton had become as much a creature of the past as though a lightning-flash had dissolved him into vapour.

Try as he might to beat down all sentiment in the crisis with which he knew himself now face to face—to analyse his state in the full light of sober manhood's understanding—Claud was fain to admit this much. Those few moments, when Elisabel March had stood before him, had changed him to the core. Until she came, he had been just a hard, calculating man of the world, full of a rather sordid plan for material self-betterment: when she passed on, she had left him healed and cleansed as by the touch of a divine hand—the scales fallen from his eyes, his very soul sick with shame at the thing he had had in contemplation.

And what had she become for him? A man on the wrong side of thirty-six, seared and scarred by the world,

one who had supped full of its horrors, follies and sorrows, is not easily self-deceived; and well Claud knew it. For that very reason he dared no longer doubt the feeling that possessed him now. He laid his eyes upon his sleeve, and his whole heart went out in a sudden cry of gratitude.

"Thank God! thank God! It is true love at last! And now I will take up my life afresh! I will make it true and clean for her sake! I will win her, and be worthy of her! I will forget all, all; and——"

Win her, and forget? Unthinkingly he had cried the words aloud, and they had been echoed back to him from the hollow dusk below. His voice went rumbling away mockingly through the arches of the bridge, until it was lost in the song of the gliding water. Claud straightened himself resolutely. For the first time, then, all the difficulties of his new-found destiny arrayed themselves clear before his eyes.

How could he win her?—he, of all men! There was the social disparity between them, yet that was nothing. It flitted but a moment carelessly across his mind. The real antagonists he had to meet were two, and these two women—Rose Petherway, but most of all, the girl herself.

First he must deal with Rose. He felt himself flush with shame at the thought of the wrong he had so nearly done her. Gratefully he realised now that, though he had gone far with Rose Petherway, he had not gone too far to make retreat dishonour, either for him or her. Thanks to the quarrel in the card-room, the word which had risen to his lips—the word that must have bound him—had never been spoken. They had parted as they had always parted; a little nearer in friendship, but still no more than friends. And such alone they must now remain for ever. So, with a few strokes of easy reasoning, he dismissed Rose Petherway finally from the case.

But to hew a way into Elisabel's heart—that was a wholly different matter. If it were but a man who loved, and a woman to be won, as yet unloving, the case had been difficult, though not extreme. But Laughton foresaw now a host of obstacles before him. There was the long-standing feud between the March family and himself. It had been all from their side: Claud knew he had never done anything to justify it beyond setting up a fair business rivalry. That the old-fashioned ways in bee-craft should go down before the new, was inevitable. But the fact remained that old Caleb March had always looked upon him as the family enemy, and in what other light was it possible for Elisabel and her mother now to regard him? Elisabel's present feeling towards him, if the truth were known, was probably one of inherited bitterest enmity; while the fact that she designed to carry on her father's work, could only serve to bring more complication to the task ahead. In the girl's mind, at least, it must breed a spirit of direct and daily conflict.

But if the longing to be all-in-all to her; to live and die but for her behoof and service; to cherish her, worship her, humbly lead her his whole life through—if these, and the deep, unutterable thankfulness he felt at the realisation of them, together made up love—the dream, the ideal he had kept bright and high so long—then there was nothing that should daunt or thwart him. All these obstacles, insuperable as they now seemed, when finally vanquished, would but have tried and proved his love. Could he have had her for the asking, how would he have known in time that his unlucky stars were not again at their old trick of worsting him? But Elisabel won, and won against all odds, would mean his own heart tempered and proved in such a fire as no fair-seeming, worthless dross of human conceit could ever withstand. If aught

remained of it then, it would be the true metal through and through.

The last glimmer of day had gone, while Claud stood thus on the old bridge, deeply pondering. Beneath him the river swept by with a low song of eddies breaking, and a swish of bending reeds. Above him the clear night sky was strewn with stars. He looked at their flinching light, and wondered whether, indeed, they had their influence on men's lives, as the old astrologers averred. Years ago, at a country fair, some travelling mountebank of a star-reader had drawn his horoscope for a shilling. A depressing story it made, he well remembered—all the heavens, it seemed, arrayed against him, save one star, but that the biggest and brightest in the sky. He looked for it now, and found it just trembling on the brink of the horizon, a brilliant point of scintillating silver, paling all others in its neighbourhood—Sirius, the unrivalled sun of the starry skies.

It was all but gone ; an hour would see it swamped in the mists of the earth-line. After a night or two, he knew, he would see it no longer until the dark evenings of October came again. But for him and his craft, its time of greatest import was nigh. What little things turn men's destinies hither and thither !—he thought, as he watched the vivid point of light flickering and veering in the cup of the far-off plains. But for the grave nonsense of the booth-philosopher, and his own digging and delving in ancient lore, the Bee-Barn would never have come into existence. Was it not old Pliny—he pondered—from whom he learnt that Sirius rained down all honey out of heaven ?—Sirius that, as a day-star now, would soon be ruler of the blue summer skies ? And he called to mind how that random recollection from an old book had decided for him his new calling—how, in the dead despair of mind that breeds in certain natures abounding

whimsicality, he had resolved to give the one heavenly body with a kindness for him, a chance to serve his need; how he had staked his all on the favour of Pliny's Honey-Star.

Well: that was ten long years ago; and now he would venture something of immeasurably greater worth in the same celestial lottery. His whole heart, all that remained to him of life on earth, his very hope of eternity even, should be staked on this new enterprise; and when the Honey-Star got up again in the October night, it should find him a saved soul, loving and beloved; or lost for ever, cast like a faulty ingot back into the melting-pot of creation.

Solemnly he raised eyes and hands to the coldly scintillating spark among the hills; and, with moving silent lips, made to it his vow.

In a little while he stood in the darkness of the village-street before the house where he knew Elisabel March had been born and spent her childhood's days, and which now she thought to make her home for ever. Only one light shone from the little dwelling, up in the corner attic-room; and that was extinguished as he gazed. He heard the deep hum of the bees in the garden. Before him was the little gate made of barrel-staves, under the canopy of flowering barberry.

Claud looked right and left, straining his ears. Not a sound came from the cottage. All was quiet in the deserted streets. At his feet he could just make out the glimmer of the whitened threshold, where he knew she had but lately trod. Swiftly he knelt, and pressed his burning lips upon the stone.

CHAPTER VII

A RECANTATION

ALL the sunny, still morning through, Elisabel March had sat on old Caleb's well-worn bench under the great damson-tree, weaving bee-skeps, and thinking as she worked.

On one side of her lay a glistening pile of straw, and on the other a heap of split bramble-wands, fresh and green from the hedgerow. Now and again, as these materials slowly transformed themselves into the dome-shaped hives under Elisabel's busy fingers, a bee would come buzzing curiously around her, wondering no doubt what had become of the white-haired old bee-master who, for so many long years, had sat in the selfsame shady nook.

Behind the damson-tree stood an open shed with heavy thatch of reeds, and within this could be seen old Caleb March's donkey-cart already loading up with the finished skeps for next week's fair-day at Stavisham. But there were not nearly enough yet. The long poles that stuck up out of the cart, and on which the skeps were threaded, had room for many more. It was the great Horse Fair, one of the principal events of the year, which took place on the closing day of each April, drawing all the village-folk for miles round to the ancient township. Then it was that most of the old-fashioned bee-loving folk bought their stock of hives for the swarming season;

and old Caleb's roomy, stout-built skeps, with their green bramble lacings, were much in demand. With earliest morning of the great day, Elisabel must be in her father's place in the corner of the crowded market-square, prepared to satisfy all comers.

Busily she plied her trade, welding the damp straw into ropes, then coiling these upon themselves, and firmly lacing each ring down until at last the completed hive appeared in her lap and was taken to the shed with the others. But though the work was hard, it was little more than mechanical. Almost unconsciously Elisabel March's deft fingers overcame the stubborn stuff, while her mind was free to dwell on the many problems by which it was now invaded.

Whinbury had done talking about Elisabel and her daring enterprise. It had been a nine days' wonder, and so had been entirely forgotten on the tenth. But for the girl herself, when the first glow and glamour of her new project had departed, there arose a keener sense than ever of the responsibility she had assumed.

The few weeks spent at home since her father's death, had opened her eyes to many things; chief among them the fact of the real poverty which had long faced them here, and of which her mother's letters to Marshminster had been careful to betray no inkling. It was plain to Elisabel now that if hard times had been of late the familiar atmosphere round the old home at Whinbury, there was worse in store for it in the immediate future, unless she herself could bring about a change. Her mother's laundering work—hitherto dependent on Mrs. March's health—had, it was true, now lost its intermittent, precarious quality since Elisabel herself could take a turn at it: she smiled as she looked down on her roughened hands, remembering the white taper fingers that so lately trifled among the frills and furbelows of Marshminster.

But Elisabel knew well that the bees were the real and only mainstay for them. If these could be made to thrive again, all might be well. Her lips set in the old determined way whenever this conclusion forced itself upon her. With every dawn she had been up and doing busily, either clearing the long grass away from the neglected hives, or overhauling the contents of sheds and store-rooms, or, latterly, sitting the whole day through under the damson-tree weaving the bee-skeps for the Fair.

Twelve o'clock came droning down from the old church tower at the top of the green, and with it the sound of many footsteps as the children poured through the street on their way from the school, and the labourers from the fields trooped home to their dinners.

The slow drowsy chime brought also Mrs. March to the cottage-door, blinking, as she wiped the suds from her fat arms; and presently she came down the garden-path with tray and pitcher to take her meal with the busy weaver of skeps. Elisabel put her work aside unwillingly enough, and for a while the two sat eating and drinking together, with the smoking hard-dick and jug of thick-milk between them. Conversation, and an effective siege on the first-named tenacious comestible, went ill together, even for the soundest teeth and the glibbest of tongues; and talk between the two was slack for a space. Said Elisabel, after a long, reflective gaze over the sunny bee-garden to the little paddock beyond, where old Caleb's donkey wandered, contentedly browsing:

"Mother, 'tis a long way—Stavisham and back. I wish Blossom were a bit younger."

Between the hard-dick and the asthma, it was some moments before Mrs. March was ready with a reply.

"Ah! an' so do I, 'Lisbel!" said she, at last. "Blossom, a wunnerful good beast 'a allers wur; but 'a caan't goo on fer ever. 'Tis lucky skeps be lighter'n

honey. But Lor! ye'll never be done i' time, gell, wi'out a murracle, I'm thinkin'."

Elisabel had already taken up her work again, though the meal was but half finished. She looked round, surprised at the lugubrious tone of the speaker.

"'Tis but three days, 'Lisbel," Mrs. March went on wearily. "Ye caan't never do't, my dear, all by your lone lonesome. An' see how things be! Th' ould beeves all gone to rack an' ruin these adunnamany years: a growed man cud do nought wi' 'em. An' your pore faather's puttin'-in, as took every penny laid by. An' me but a ailin', feckless ould body; an' yerself nought but a gell, wi' all said an' done. Ah! an' never reckonin' th' worst on't——Him on th' Hill allers agen us! Na, na, 'Lisbel, deary! Better look ut all i' th' face, soon as late, an' know th' trewth on't!"

Elisabel turned a keen glance on her mother. It was so unusual a thing to find Mrs. March out of spirits, that her deft fingers all but halted at her task. But the next instant they flew on as busily as ever.

"'Tis but one side, all that, mother," she said quietly and cheerily. "Now reckon up the t'other. There's the old house that is all our own, as no one can take away from us, to give us shelter. If money is scarce, 'tis not so scarce as debt. Your wind-break is better, and that makes more wash-tub earnings. Rachel, lying a-bed so long up there in the skeeling-room—why, you said yourself only yesternight she was never looking so bright and happy! And as for me, just speir at me, mother!"

She sprang up to her full height, put her bare arms akimbo, and stood a moment smiling down superbly on the old woman. Mrs. March regarded her with quivering lip.

"Ay! y'are slap an' hearty enow, my dear, th' Lor' o' all be praised! If nought but will an' work wur needed,

I'd ha' no call fer grizzlin'. But that bean't all, 'Lisbel. There be things agen ye, things that—— Ah! pore faather! 'a well knowed th' rights on't, 'a did!"

The girl had fallen to her task again. At this she pulled the bramble-bine so vigorously that it broke with a snap. She reddened.

"Fer shame, mother! 'Tis no Christian talk that! Poor faather, he was failing i' mind and body all those years, and couldn't rightly judge of things. And as for Mr. Laughton—why! I'd wager, if the truth were known, he has hardly given a thought, good or bad, to us poor folk sin' he came to Whinbury!"

Mrs. March drummed on her ample bodice with both fists as a solatium to her malady. Her lip quivered more and more. Elisabel saw the old eyes beginning to swim in their deep crevices in the ruddy bulk of her face.

"Na, na, gell! Glad I'd be to think that o' him, fer his best or worst. But 'tis far other, my dear, you maark me! Maast' Laughton—'a be hatchin' real mischief agen us, 'Lisbel, as I knaws full well."

Elisabel threw up her chin scornfully.

"'Tis some idle busybody that's been clappering to you, mother! Never listen to them, deary! Stopped ears soon make silent tongues, as I've well proved myself afore now!"

But Mrs. March was not to be persuaded. She bent to the girl mysteriously.

"Listen, 'Lisbel," said she, under her breath. "Maast' Laughton, if 'a means well, 'a would keep to's own country; an' that 'a allers did in poor Caleb's time, I'll never deny. But 'tis different these laast days. Never a day but 'a goos by, 'Lisbel, speirin' in so curious an' solemn-like. An' i' th' dead o' nights—ay! every night a'most—I ha' heerd a step up an' down, up an' down, out i' th'

street there, when all honest folks oughter been safe a-bed. Ah! I knawed who 'twur, right enow; an' well I knows th' meanin' on't. Na, na, 'Lisbel, dear! Doan't tell me! If 'twur but human craft agen us, I'd ha' no fear. But 'tis more'n that. Lorey-me! how I do wish ye wur out o' harm's way, up at th' faarm, churn-maiding!"

Elisabel had been listening intently enough now. As her mother droned on, a fire had slowly kindled in the sombre blue depths of her eyes. She had finished her skep. This time she did not pause to take it to the shed, but gripped a great handful of straw, and went feverishly to work on the next one.

"Well; I'm glad you told me, mother," she said, after a long pause. "'Tis hard to say what he might be doing hereabouts so late, but little he'll get for his trouble, I'll warrant."

She stopped, with the bramble-bine poised in mid-air, to contemplate the distance for one grave moment. And then the old rippling merry laugh rang out.

"But I am ready for him, mother! 'Tis never too late to learn, they say; and if he wants a lesson at his time o' life—well and good. Leave Gentleman-Laughton to me!"

For a long time after her mother had gone back to her soapsuds and squelching linen, Elisabel worked on unremittingly. The sun had got round in the sky, and now poured its yellow rays aslant into the corner where she sat, wondrously transmuting everything. The straw became heaped spillikins of gold, and the bramble-bines whip-lashes of living emerald. The bees that came lancing through the shadowy arcade of foliage on either hand, seemed to strike fire as they cut into the zone of light. In Elisabel's dark hair the sun picked out a thousand glittering curves and tangents, and revealed what rich blood flowed deep under the ivory of her cheek, of her

bare strong arms, of her supple throat, breaking out at last in a mountain-freshet of colour where her lips held firm together.

In the canopy of the damson-tree overhead, a wren poured forth a slender silver plaint. Every bush in the old garden had its rejoicing thrush or calmly soliloquising blackbird. And far and near there rose into the sun-steeped air such a wild sweet song of life and work as only honey-bees can bring to afternoons in April.

Elisabel worked on, scarce raising her eyes a moment from her task. Behind the hedgerow of the garden ran a little public footway, no more than a seam in the dense green growth. It served as a short cut to the river-bank for the fisher-folk, and for the reed and rush-gatherers, according to the season. Several times in the long day footsteps had gone trudging past there. Elisabel had recognised them all by the sound, without turning her head. And now there came one that she knew as well as any, yet least expected to hear in the midst of a working-day.

The footfall ceased hard by. There was a scratching sound as of elbows being settled comfortably into the hedge-gap. George Lindup's most apologetic, most propitiatory cough projected itself towards the damson-tree.

"What! You, George!"

"Meself right enow, 'Lisbel!"

She had thrown him but a quick, albeit a friendly glance, and then turned diligently to her work again. How long was he going to stay there, to hinder her?—she thought. She did not want George Lindup, nor anyone just then. The little wren overhead intervened with an undeniable suggestion of romance in her whistle. When the song ceased the cough came again.

"Bein' rid-up, an' all ready to start, an' belike away

fr' hoame a good month or more, wi' one thing an' t'other "—George reeled off the words in a sing-song, monotonous way, as though he had carefully learnt them by heart—" an' knowin' as how ye wudn't be fur fr' th' ould tree, 'Lisbel, this time o' day, wi' th' skep work goin' forrard; sez I, I'll jest pull around to th' bee-garden, to wish 'em all good-bye afore I goos traipsin' away, Lor' knows where."

" Rinding-time come round again, George? "

" Ay, th' rindin' agen, 'Lisbel. 'Tis purty far off, this time: way over in th' Long Woods by Ambledown. A hunnerd an' forty trees to throw, as the wood-reeve sends wured on't; let aloane hurdle-makin'. I'll scarce be hoame agen this side o' Missummertide, even wi' all luck reckoned."

He leaned forward a while, intently studying the picture under the damson-tree.

" Bees farin' all right, 'Lisbel? "

Now why could he not guess that he was not wanted? —thought Elisabel. But she answered him cordially enough.

" Right as they'll ever be this summer, George. Poor faather, he's let them down terrible bad these last years. 'Tis not possible to say how they'll make out, not till burning-time. But I'm very busy, George."

" Ah! I b'leeve ye!—wi' th' 'Arse-Fair so nigh! Ye warnts none to hinder ye," he returned sympathetically.

He showed, however, no eagerness to depart. On the contrary, his attention became so engrossed in the skep-weaving that he gradually overcame the resistance of the thorn-boughs upon which he leant, and stood at last within the garden. He coughed again as though the act had some stimulative effect on his courage, and his hand stole to the pocket of his velveteen coat, as if to assure himself that some object deposited there was still safe.

Elisabel gave another quick, and this time rather apprehensive glance in his direction.

"Well, then; come in a while, George, if ye've naun to do," she said reluctantly. "Mother will be along, soon as she sees you."

George Lindup's long gaitered legs picked a way carefully between the intervening cabbages. He came to rest at last on the extreme end of the bench, one gnarled, sunburnt hand polishing his shaven chin, and the other still hidden in his pocket. Elisabel worked quietly on, but her instinct revealed to her a new element in the atmosphere.

"'Twarn't your mither, 'Lisbel," said George, after a pause, "not 'er as I wished fer to see pertickler. Leastways not to-wanst-like." He turned upon her a suddenly flaming face, and his breath threshed as though he were at the end of a mile's hard running. "I be goin' away, gell; an'—an' when ould friends has to paart—Lor'! why I ha' knowed ye sin' ye wur a babby, ha'n't I, 'Lisbel?"

The wren began again her too obviously sentimental plaint overhead.

"Shoosh!" cried Elisabel sternly, striking at the lower branches with a bramble-switch. "Ay, 'tis so, George: there or thereabout. But there comes a time when people leave off being babies and turn to grown folk, and then other folk mustn't talk nonsense to them."

But George was evidently too intent on some deep-laid plan to heed or even to hear. He had extricated from his pocket a bulky wodge of tissue-paper, and was now tearing it apart with reckless fingers. Something glittered in the sunshine, and the next moment a curious object had fallen into Elisabel's lap. It was a brooch of great size and antiquated appearance; a memento-mori of a kind much in favour with a certain class of Early Victorian

grandmother—a vast square ornament consisting of a gold frame, with a pane of glass occupying its centre, underneath the glass being a heavy plait of faded hair. Elisabel stared at the ancient gewgaw in helpless panic.

"'Tis no more'n a trifle, 'Lisbel," said George Lindup, polite disparagement in his voice, yet in his eye a reverent admiration for the brooch plainly visible; "naun but a trifle, an' 'twur but waste to keep 'un stowed away i' th' ould chest fer ever. I'd be real glad to think o' you a-wearin' on't, 'Lisbel, when I be fur away, an' lonesome i' th' wild woods."

Elisabel was holding the embarrassing treasure at arm's-length now, her face a study in solemn, brow-puckered perplexity. Of a sudden a desperate eloquence seized upon George Lindup.

"'Tis this way on't, 'Lisbel," said he hurriedly, "an' 'tis no good denyin' o't. Ontil I seed ye at th' pore ould gaffer's puttin'-in, I wur o' wan mind; but since that day—well, I ha' been o' quite another. Summat queer ha' happened i' my inside, 'Lisbel— Lor' aloane knaws what it be. But I caan't sleep sound o' nights, an' I caan't make no headway wi' my wittles. There I be, gell, night an' day, doin' naun but think, think, think o' you. Fegs! what a time I ha' had these laast days, to be sure an' all!"

He brought out a red bandana handkerchief, and gave his streaming forehead a fierce wipe.

"'Lisbel, ye knaws how things be wi' me," he went on faster than ever. "Screwin' an' scrapin', year in an' year out, all fer th' hope o' wan day seein' th' name o' Lindup sweet an' clean agen i' all men's eyes. Ay! I'll do't, gell; an' thought wanst to do't aloane. But this onaccountable thing laid hoult o' th' innards o' me, an' I wur all upside an' downside in a moment. Lor'! I caan't never tell ye, 'Lisbel! But laast night, all of a

suddent-like, in the dead o' dark, I comes broad awake, an' then I sees all clear. 'Ye fule, George Lindup!' sez summat jest like a voice beside o' me, 'a good wife ull save twice as faast fer ye, an' her own keep into th' bargain. A single man be a fule allers; but ne'er so gurt a fule as when 'a keeps single fer savin's sake. Git ye along, George,' th' voice sez, 'wi' to-morrer's morn, an' arst pretty 'Lisbel Maarch, as ye loves so trew, what 'a thinks on't; an' if she'll ha' ye fer her own man! Gie her time,' sez th' voice. 'Doan't ye goo fer to hurry her, George! 'A be but a young maid,' sez th' voice, 'an' likely 'a'll not know her mind all to wanst. So you jest only tell her how 'tis wi' ye, George; an' then off you goos to rindin', an' leaves her a free month or two to think it ower.' An' now I ha' done it, 'Lisbel dear; I'll be steppin' right away!"

Thereupon he sprang up, and without another word marched straight for the gap in the hedgerow. His step was ringing away on the stones of the footpath towards the riverside, before Elisabel recovered her presence of mind and her voice together. But now she raced after him, calling his name. She held out the brooch to him, her face flushed, her glance full of mingled compassion and agitation.

"No, I caan't, George!" she said breathlessly. "I caan't take it! I have never thought of you, never thought of anyone like—like that; and—and perhaps I never shall, at least for years to come. Take it back, George dear! It is too good for me. I mean I am not good enough to——"

"Not good enow, 'Lisbel? Not good enow to wear pore faather's ould Aunt Mary's brooch, holy angel though she ha' been these fifty year an' more?"

The awestruck incredulity in his tone, the blank face he turned to her, set the corners of Elisabel's mouth

twitching even while the tears pricked in her eyes. But though she must hurt this good man for her own conscience' sake, to laugh at him seemed unutterable baseness. She choked down laugh and sob together.

"No, George, at least not now; never, perhaps. I mean I couldn't—— Don't you understand, George, that two people may be real good friends, but—but—one of them may feel as she could never—— There! I am being cruel to you, George, and I didn't really mean it so!"

George Lindup came close to where she stood in the hedge-gap. He looked her appealingly in the eyes.

"'Lisbel," said he, his voice all but failing him, "doan't say it, deary! Doan't 'ee goo fer to say 'No' straight off like that'n, wi'out a thought. Take time—a month, six months, if ye will; an' then maybe I can keep some sort o' heart an' pluck together. But if ye gies th' wured plunk-out, onconsiderin'-like, Lor' love me if I knaws how I'll——"

His voice seemed to dry up in his throat. He could say no more. He could only stand and beseech her with eyes full of devotion, of longing, of wonder at her beauty—deep-set, true eyes that never before had looked in the face of woman with meaning of love.

Irresolutely Elisabel turned the brooch over and over in her hand, every thought adrift in this sea of new difficulty that had so suddenly engulfed her.

"What can I say to ye, George!" she cried at last helplessly. "How can I gi'e ye comfort, dear, wi'out—wi'out—— Oh! I must be true now, true to myself, George! A word once spoken, and a thing once done—they are done for ever; and I daren't—I daren't——"

A flush of hope sprang hot into George Lindup's face. He caught her up eagerly.

"Never a wured, my dear, I arst fer; never thought,

nor wured, nor deed as can bind ye. Only keep it, 'Lisbel! Keep it till I comes agen by-an'-by. An' then keep it for ever, or—or gie it to me back agen wi'out wured said. I shall know."

Elisabel wavered. And then her eyes sought George's face, a look of honest trust and admiration fairly won from them as she thrust the ponderous trinket into her breast. A moment later she stood looking after him as he strode down the path towards the river, both her hands tingling from his ardent farewell grip. With a sob that was half a sigh she went back to her skep-making under the damson-tree. The little wren fell to singing her blithest, most self-congratulatory measure, as though she plumed herself on a good day's work.

George Lindup's boat lay where he had left it, moored among the reeds, its stern piled up with his tools of wood-craft and such personal effects as were needed for a long sojourn away from home. He pushed the boat out of the mud, and set off up the shining waterway, pulling a clean, leisurely stroke.

There was a long journey before him. A couple of hours of that quiet occupation might find him at the North Woods by Ambledown. But George was incapable of hurrying just then, or indeed of holding to his task for more than a few moments at a stretch. Continually he must be resting on his oars to commune with himself, go over his interview with Elisabel, smile broadly, grow serious again, then with reddening face bend to the work once more.

One of these fits of abstraction seized him soon after he had got clear of the village and was gliding through the willow-country beyond. A voice from the bank brought him suddenly out of his reverie. Looking up, he saw Laughton.

Conversation between Claud and the young woodman took one invariable form on all occasions. As the two professed bachelors of the village, it had long been a standing source of pleasantry with them to congratulate each other on the bliss of single life which each enjoyed, and to exchange airy philosophies anent the shortcomings of wedlock. Claud now began the usual raillery.

"Ah! this is just as it should be, George," said he. "There you are, and here am I, happy bachelors both of us, taking our ease on a fine afternoon just because the mood seizes us, and no one to say us nay. But only think, George, how it is with all the poor fellows who have been foolish enough to yield to the wiles of woman! Why, they are all slaving away for dear life, wasting the sunshine with work, and spoiling their tempers, and——"

There was such an unexpected look on George Lindup's face, such sour, stern reproof in his glance, that Claud pulled up short in his burlesque harangue, to regard his companion doubtfully.

"Mr. Laughton, sir," said George, his head stiffly erect, "'tis not fer me to goo agen wured o' yourn. But 'tis rank, rampin' nonsense, sir—all that'n. Pore fellers, i'deed! Wiles o' wimmin! Sir, I'll be as bould as to say ye doan't never desarve to ha' no sunshine, ner sight o' good wimmin as be th' salt o' th' airth, and us but its pore rubble-stuff! Na, na, doan't ye crack on i' that way to me no more, sir!"

Claud looked down on the speaker in mingled amusement and amazement.

"Oh, ho! George!" he cried softly.

"Ay! 'tis so!" returned George Lindup, all aglow now with virtuous indignation. "A good 'ooman—where ull ye match her, sir, in all Gorramighty's works? Ah, where indeed! Doan't ye talk to me! I knaws!"

"Why, what has happened to you, George? Not so

very long ago there was nothing bad enough you could find to say against——"

"Gurrrh! Caan't th' fule o' yesterday be th' wise man o' to-morrow?"

He was gently backing with his oars to keep the boat abreast of his interlocutor against the swiftly flowing tide. Laughton studied him keenly, then laughed.

"Now I come to think of it, George, you have got a look of absurd happiness under your scowl. I am beginning to suspect things. You don't really mean that some bright, deceitful pair of eyes has——"

A slow smile overcame George's gravity.

"Ah! an' what about you, sir?—you be th' laast wan to talk o' deceitful eyes, by all accounts. There bean't nobody, be there?—up along by Whinbury faarm, belike—as might make a wise man o' you, too, wan of these days? No!—not 'aaf!"

"There is not an atom of truth in that yarn, George. I give you my word on it; and you can tell everyone what I say."

"Ah! Hum! Maybe!"

George flung the words back in smiling, scornful incredulity, and bent to his oars.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HORSE FAIR

A CHANCE pedestrian, approaching Stavisham on the morning of the great Horse Fair by any one of the various roads concentring thither, would have become aware that something unusual was taking place on that countryside long before he obtained his first view of the quaint old market-town lying in its wooded fold of the plains.

He would have been overtaken every minute or two by farmers' gigs. Smart dog-carts would have driven by containing men in unmistakable horsey costume, and with the still more obvious stamp of the stable on their bronzed, cadaverous faces. At frequent intervals, carriage-parties from the great country mansions would have come bowling up behind him; here and there a gentleman on horseback with hunting-crop, and hound at the heels of his clattering nag; ragged gipsies, each riding one sorry steed, and hauling after him several others equally decrepit; an almost continuous stream of riding or driving nondescripts flowing steadily onward, and raising a billow of white dust which marked the course of the road a mile ahead amidst the fresh spring greenery of the trees.

And such a pedestrian, if he happened to be a walker above the common pace, would himself, in turn, have

overtaken various little knots of townward-wending folk; family parties from the villages, all in their Sunday best; labourers out of work going to the Fair on the chance of employment; itinerant musicians, hawkers, tramps, stable hangers-on, all the mysterious flotsam and jetsam of country highways; perhaps a plodding Punch-and-Judy show, or a cage of fortune-telling canaries, or a mountebank with spangled pink legs showing beneath the skirts of his ancient coat.

But drawing near to the town, the wayfarer's attention would have been deflected from all these portents of an unusual state in local affairs by still more decided evidence.

What at first sounded like the steady hum of gnats in a sunbeam, or the distant fall of water, at last resolved itself into the very voice of human business at its tensest. The deep undertone divided and subdivided, became alternately simple and infinitely complex. It rose and fell, and lifted again into the breezy morning; yet every step onward brought it louder and clearer. At length a glimpse of bunting glowed under the old flint gateway of the town, and a moment more found the traveller lost in the multitude that thronged the narrow streets within, his ears full of the din of neighing, champing, curveting horses, pedlars shrilly crying their wares, the burr of country speech, laughter and the incessant impact of hobnail boots on cobble-stones, at once like the growl of thunder and the swish of wind in reeds.

But it was in the great rectangle of the market-place that both the pleasure and the business of the day reached their culmination. A space in its centre had been roped off, and strewn with tan, and here the auctioneer had his rostrum, and hither the animals to be sold were led one by one. Outside the ropes was gathered a crowd of bidders and lookers-on, standing six or eight deep on every hand,

save where a narrow path was kept clear for the passage of the horses to and fro. Outside the ring of buyers was another and larger ring, composed of the horses themselves awaiting their turn for sale; tied up side by side to long rows of posts, and presenting a phalanx of rich glossy colour in all directions.

The extreme circumference of the market-place, hard against the buildings that flanked the square, was taken up by an unbroken array of hucksters' stalls, rifle-ranges, show-booths, caravans; while the space between these and the horse-ring was entirely filled by a surging, jostling crowd of holiday-makers, to which every village for miles round had contributed its quota.

From his elevated position on the steps of the "Golden Fleece," the market-house and principal hostelry in Stavisham, whence he had a view over the whole of the square, Claud Laughton quietly surveyed the scene, and thought, of all the past Fairs he had attended on this spot, never had he seen so many horses there, nor so many people, nor listened to such a confused medley of sound.

No one, it seemed, could offer anything for sale without declaiming at the top of his voice its many qualities. Every booth and side-show possessed its leather-lunged, brazen-throated advocate, desperately trying to outbawl his neighbour. Pipe-organs and mechanical pianos mingled their internecine strains on every hand. The shooting-galleries kept up an incessant popping fusillade. In the far corner over against the town-hall, a steam merry-go-round burdened the air with its thunderous cacophony. Where the auction-sale was proceeding, at the focus of all this sound and fury, a deep continuous murmur uprose, in the midst of which Laughton could detect the voice of the auctioneer, strident and metallic, as he ran the bidding up on a good lot, or loudly insisted on the possession of virtues in the horse before him,

in spite of a storm of derisive comments, and the animal's own conscientious resolve to display the truth on the spot.

Laughton had but just arrived, his boots white with dust from his seven-mile tramp out of Whinbury. He had little interest in the recreative portion of the Fair, and none at all in its paramount feature. But he had business to do, nevertheless. Here, with every spring, he was accustomed to meet the professional or semi-professional bee-keepers established within a wide radius of the town, and with these people he drove a thriving trade. As a breeder of queen-bees, Laughton had long established a great reputation. "Whinbury queens" were eagerly sought after by all up-to-date bee-men who recognised the value of blood in this, as in all other live-stock; and it was at the annual Horse Fair that Claud booked most of his orders for the season. Within a very few minutes of his appearance on the summit of the spotless stone steps of the "Golden Fleece," he was descried by someone in the crowd and pounced upon.

"Mornin', bee-maaster!"

Claud stood the crush of the huge hand that was stretched forth to him, without a wince, though he could have shouted with pain.

"A real fine Fair—wan o' th' best I reckermembers; an' I ha' seed a few i' my time. Th' usual score o' fertile-blacks end o' July, bee-maaster. An' half a score o' virgins soon as ye've got 'em. Lor'! 'tis warm enow fer missummer! An' dusty, I doan't think!"

The old man pulled off his squat, square felt hat, revealing a bald head of startling whiteness above his mahogany face. From the hat he produced a handkerchief, and fell to mopping his perspiring forehead.

"Well, and how are the bees doing over in Redesdown, Mr. Budger?"

"Ten seams purty nigh all round. Willows been

famous, not to speak o' fruit-blossom. 'Twill be a gurt honey-year, by my way o' thinkin', Maast' Laughton. Did ye mind how th' Star gooed away? Red, 'twur, red as rubies, sir! An' when th' Star goos away red i' th' spring, 'tis allers a token o' fine times i' store fer bee-folk."

"You believe in the Honey-Star, then, do you, Mr. Budger?"

By unanimous, though unexpressed agreement, they had moved towards the bar, and now stood there together, having with difficulty fought a passage to the counter through the congested company.

"B'lieve!" The shining pewter-pot stopped impressively in mid-air on its way to the old bee-farmer's lips. "B'lieve! Ay, as I doos i' Howly Scriptur'! When ye ha' kep' bees nigh upon forty year, an' allers marked th' signs o' th' seasons—— Ah! an' I'll tell ye another thing, Maast' Laughton! My ould 'ooman an' me, did ever ye see two as wur more o' a pair—jest made fer one another? Now did ye ever?"

"No, indeed; and haven't I often said so?"

"Well; 'twur arter a red Star-gooin' as I courted her; an' so it should allers come about, wi' bee-keepin' folk. 'Tis our lucky sign."

Claud endured afresh the vice-like grip, as again, a few minutes later, they stood on the steps together, preparing to part.

"But mind ye," said the old man for a last word, "'tis th' colour o' death as well as good fortun'. Th' ould book, as I showed ye, has it all down i' print, plain as plain. An' han't us had sure testimony on't o' late? Pore Caleb Maarch; din't 'a goo to's long hoame jest i' front o' th' Star?"

"Ah!" returned Laughton reflectively, "the old Whinbury skeppist. This must be the first Horse Fair

for fifty years back without his heap of big straw hives over in the corner there by the church, and his old wrinkled face glowering among them. There's many of the ancient school will miss his stall to-day, I'm thinking. They will have to go to the gipsies for skeps this time, I suppose."

"Gipsies?"

Mr. Budger looked at Claud astonished.

"Gipsies?—devil a bit! Doan't ye know as his darter have ta'en to th' callin'? An' you a Whinbury man, forebye! Why, there she be, ower there i' th' ould spot, wi' better skeps than ever pore Caleb made, good workman as 'a wur! I be goin' d'rectly-minnut to buy a couple fer swarm-takin.' Gipsies i'deed! Ne'er a wan 'ud goo arter dirty gipsy-truck, I reckons, when 'a can ha' good clane Christian work, an' a smile from a real purty face into th' bargain!"

For some minutes after Mr. Budger's departure, Claud stood gazing across the square, shading his eyes with both hands from the glaring sun.

Yes—there was the old stall sure enough, just as he always remembered it. Why had he not seen it before? It stood in the recess by the jutting church-porch on the sunny side, and upon it was piled a great pyramid of shining yellow hives. Above the stall was a sort of banner, slung between two high poles, and bearing the legend "Whinbury Skeps" in large white letters on a blue ground. The banner was new, and new also was the figure that stood beneath it. Claud's heart leaped in his breast at the sight, and his hands trembled on his brows.

Yes—it was Elisabel! There she was, within a stone's throw of him, and he had never thought to look that way! On an impulse, without considering what he would do when he got there, he plunged down the steps, designing

to make his way through the crowd in the direction of the stall.

But he had scarce set foot on the cobbles of the market-place, when his progress was arrested. A sudden warning shout went up among the people thronging the streets. The crowd parted right and left. A phaeton drawn by a pair of horses came round the corner from the High Street at a dashing, dust-scattering trot, and drew up with great science and flourish before the door of the "Golden Fleece."

Turning, curious to see what manner of man would drive through crowded streets so recklessly, Claud beheld young Tom Petherway on the box of the vehicle; beside him the old farmer in his tall grey felt hat; and behind, on the reversed back seat, a vision in white and lilac—Rose Petherway, full-blown, high-coloured, beautiful, already waving her gloved hand towards Claud, whom she had at once picked out in the crowd.

"Why! there the scamp is!" Tom Petherway stopped in his descent from the box, on seeing Laughton. "Is it you, or your ghost, my dear Claud? We all thought you were dead, man; or else gone to Jericho. Now, why on earth haven't you been near the farm all this time, you miserable, backsliding, gib-faced old—— Hallo! Roper! A bit behind time, are we not? Well, don't look like that at your friends! Smile, you villain! What ever does it matter?"

Roper, who had come up, unseen by Claud, on the other side of the vehicle, was obviously in a fume of annoyance which he lacked either the will or the art to suppress.

"Matter? It will matter, I suppose, if we lose the horses through your confounded—— I beg pardon, Miss Petherway! But really, in business—— You see, the sale began at half-past ten, and now it is nearly——"

"Couldn't get Tom out o' bed!" interrupted Farmer Petherway, with rather a cold stare for Roper. "These late nights as 'a keeps! Well, well; 'tis no good wastin' more time argying. Let's get up to the ring, and ha' done with it. Are you coming along o' us, Rose?"

Claud heard Roper's voice persuasive above the blowing of the horses. "You must come, Miss Petherway, you positively must! I've found the very nag to suit you. In all my life I never saw such muscle and reach. Sixteen-a-half, and a bright bay. Sire 'Matlock,' and dam——"

But Rose bent, and distributed low commands right and left. The next moment she had sprung to the ground, the three men had hurried away towards the sale-ring, and the phaeton had disappeared into the yard of the "Golden Fleece." Claud found himself confronting Rose Petherway, at complete loss what to say to her, wondering what she would choose to say to him.

But she was in no hurry to talk. She stood for a moment with her parasol held in both hands crosswise behind her, her head thrown back, her grey eyes lazily smiling at him under their drooping, gold-fringed lids. At length she nodded up her chin petulantly.

"Tom spoke for himself," she said. "*I* have not been wondering. I knew you too well. Still, there is a limit, even for busy bee-masters. But now you can make amends, Claud, and show me round the Fair."

"I have been up to my eyes in all sorts of work," he told her, as they moved off side by side. "The spring-cleaning, and all the super-racks to get ready, and one thing after another. Bee-keeping is not all honey, you know, Rose."

He had fallen into an apologetic tone, without intending it. But it was the least difficult method for the moment. Rose opened her white satin sunshade with a triumphant swish.

"Well, forget work for to-day, dear bee-master, and think of no one else but me. Let us see some of the fun. Come and look what this man is doing."

They pushed into a ring of spectators. In its centre was a little man dressed as a jockey, a black patch over one eye and his yellow silk pea-jacket covered with medals and tags of ribbon. He had already shouted himself into a congested state.

"One shilling, only one shilling!" he was bawling, flourishing a sheaf of dirty envelopes as Rose and Claud came up. "Dicky Denvers, turf-adviser to all the nobility an' gentry, offers ye the straight tip, a dead-sure certainty, for one shilling only. Do not delay, ladies and gentlemen! Only seven more left. It is the chance o' your life, and if you miss it——"

"A sporting tipster," said Claud, placing his hand within Rose's arm to move her on. She pressed the hand to her side, and imprisoned it there for a moment.

"And what is that queer woman doing?"

The woman stood on a box, paper and pencil in hand, in the centre of a gaping mob. She wore college-cap, and spectacles, and the faded scarlet robe of a doctor of divinity.

"Your character and qualifications haccurately described, and future success in life hassured, for two-pence only; full written description, sixpence. Now this gentleman has the faculty of hacquisitiveness remarkably developed, hintegrity fair, philoprogenitiveness well marked, moral tendency only moderate. Tuesday is his hunlucky day, and——"

The shrill voice became indistinguishable in the general uproar, as they moved off.

Gradually they worked their way from spectacle to spectacle until they had reached the opposite side of the square, where the solemn weather-worn old church looked

coldly down on all the hubbub and commotion. Here Claud would have turned again, but Rose pushed steadily on through the crowd.

"I want to have a word with someone," she said to him, "someone who has a stall close by here, I am told, and who greatly interests me. Ah! there she is! Your dreaded rival at home, Claud. Good gracious! you are not going to leave me so soon?"

"I have business to see to," he began hurriedly, and then stopped. Rose studied him.

"Why! I believe you are afraid of her, Claud!" she burst out in mocking merriment. "A common village-girl to awe your High-and-Mightiness! Come! I will not have you disgrace your station and your friends by any such nonsense! Come with me and talk to her; I insist upon it!"

But his hand was on her arm again, and this time with a firm grip. Quietly, but irresistibly, he steered her off in the opposite direction.

"Why should I meddle with other people's affairs, Rose? You know the old man would gladly have put a knife into me any day, and no doubt the girl has been brought up to take much the same view. I shall not do any good by seeming to defy her. Come over there and see the fattest woman in the world, and the fortune-telling pig."

They spent an hour in a tour of the various show-booths, and at length found themselves once more outside the "Golden Fleece." Rose had made a permanent captive of the hand by this time. She twirled her parasol jubilantly.

"I must just run in and tell them there will be an extra one for lunch," she was saying, as she mounted the steps, when he stopped her.

"I am sorry, but I cannot join you this time, Rose.

I have to walk out to Peddercombe, to look at some bees for sale there, and——"

"Peddercombe? Why! it is miles away!"

Rose turned. Her easy happy smile soused out in a moment, under a cloud of disappointment. She bit her lip, looking at him reproachfully.

"Of course it will take you hours and hours! What a nuisance! But if you have made up your mind to go, nothing I can say will stop you, I suppose. Oh, dear! I hate being alone at Fairs! I wish I hadn't let father persuade me to come!"

She shut her parasol with a snap, and rustled off up the steps in her elaborate finery. He watched her, but she passed through the doorway without a single backward look. With a shrug at this, Claud turned, and made off up the High Street at breakneck speed.

The truth was that Peddercombe had been a mere subterfuge of the moment, for the need was on him to call an instant halt in his course, and give himself time to think. Claud was furiously angry with himself. In these last hours he had done everything he ought not to have done, and gone utterly against the policy he had so carefully thought out for present and future guidance. Instead of restoring his relations with Rose to their old safe basis of friendship, such as had existed up to the night of the dance, their new character had become rather intensified than diminished by the morning's wretched bungling. He saw of course that it had not been entirely, nor even mainly, his own act. He had felt from the first that Rose had realised his lapsed state of mind, and had set herself to renovate it. But he knew he had been carried away far too easily by her frank flattery and her favour. Charming him against his will, she had soon succeeded in disarming him. He remembered now a hundred glances and words of his, that he could

call by no other name than rank falsity to both himself and her. He had been cajoled into playing a part unthinkable for any straightforward, honourable man. Furiously he drove ahead through the thinning houses until he found himself out at last between green hedgerows, with the noise of the Fair sounding far behind him like the deep note of some gargantuan threshing-machine.

It was well on towards sunset before Claud Laughton set foot again on the cobble-stones of Stavisham high-street. Gradually the sun-bright radiance of the day had failed. A dense bank of cloud had got up in the west, and the yellow light, though still mistily overbrimming its ragged edge, threatened with every moment to fade out behind the murky barrier. The breeze of the morning had gone, and a dead calm was over everything. The flags and banners in the market-place drooped limply against their staves. Chimney-smoke went straight up into the torpid air. A company of swifts charged hither and thither over the house-tops screaming ominously. A storm was coming up—thought Claud to himself, as he trudged moodily along in the direction of the market-place.

The blare of the organs, and general uproar of the Fair, were, if anything, more pronounced than ever; but, while the recreative side of the function had still the evening before it, when those people who had been at work all day would arrive to swell the throng, the business part of the proceedings was now practically at an end. Small dealers were packing up their wares and getting ready to depart. The centre of the market-place, hitherto taken up by the auctioneer's ring and the rows of tethered horses, was now a deserted space littered over with straw and paper. Though the crowd was greater than ever, a lull had come in the energy of the different would-be entertainers; and most of them were gathered in little parties in odd corners, idling or brewing tea.

Claud's design had been to pass through the town without stopping, and thence straight on towards Whinbury. He desired above all things to avoid a second encounter with the Petherway party; but, believing them to have left long since, and taking the shorter way across the northern flank of the square, he came upon them too suddenly, and at too close quarters, to render possible a retreat. The phaeton was standing in front of the inn, with Rose already occupying one of the back seats. The farmer, Tom, and Roper stood talking together on the pavement hard by, the two younger men obviously in high good spirits.

"I tell you there is heaps of room in the cab!" Tom was calling out, much more loudly than was necessary, as Claud came up. "You must jog along back with us, my dear old Panjandrum, and we'll finish an excellent day with a real rattling good night. Won't we, father? Rosie! do help me to persuade him! You can't possibly fill two seats, can you now?"

Claud became immediately aware of several things—first, that Roper, far from being loth to accompany the party, had every intention of doing so, if he decently could; second, that the old farmer was consumed with anxiety to get Tom safely home, and was willing to include Roper in the process, if that would assist his design; and, third, that Rose Petherway had her own plans which she was firmly resolved to carry through. But Claud was in no way prepared for the audacious fiction of her next move. She spoke to Roper, but her glance was directed meaningly upon himself.

"We are all very sorry," she said, "but we—I have already promised Mr. Laughton a lift home; and here he is, you see, come to claim his place. Mr. Roper must give us the pleasure another time."

For an instant Claud wavered, and then he met and beat

down her glance, full of its warm appealing light, with one of cool, deliberately misconstruing courtesy.

"I am afraid it is a pleasure I must give up," he said, "I find there is still something to detain me in town a little longer. And you must not wait, Mr. Petherway, or you may get caught by the storm. It is looming up very black over there."

He looked at Rose no more, though he knew her eyes remained steadily upon him for the next few silent, palpitating moments. And then she laughed, and flung into the corner of the seat.

"Come along then, Mr. Roper!" she cried carelessly, "I was afraid we were going to lose you, but we are in luck's way, I see. And now we shall be able to have that real rattling night, Tom spoke of."

Claud drew the old farmer aside.

"I think I should drive myself, sir, if I were you," he said, under his voice, "that sharp bit down at Cudlow's corner——"

"Yes, yes! Of course I intended to, Laughton! Do ye take me for a blind man, or what?"

But Claud well knew the angry irritation of the speaker was not directed to himself. He said no more, stepping back quietly to watch the vehicle go off from the steps of the hotel. Rose kept her face studiously averted from him, but Roper was looking his way still. As the phaeton turned the corner, he swept Claud a low ironical bow, and got for answer a steady look out of a face of stone.

For some minutes after the Petherways had departed, Laughton stood gazing over the square in a state of glum irresolution. He saw that the corner by the church-porch was empty now: Elisabel had furled her blue banner and was gone with the rest of the business stall-keepers. It was past the hour of sunset, and an untimely dusk was creeping on. The westward pall of cloud had risen

almost to the zenith, and the rest of the sky had overspread with swampy grey. Little catspaws of wind came and went shrilly about the house-tops, or twirled up the litter of the square in furious spirals. At long intervals a single slow warm drop of rain fell from the darkening air.

At last Claud pulled himself out of his despondent mood with a jerk, filled and lighted a pipe, then turning his back on the chaos of resounding organs, kerosene flares, and moving shadowy crowd that constituted a still vigorous remnant of the Fair, he set out for his long walk home.

Before he had covered a mile, the night had fallen black as pitch, and the storm was grumbling and flickering behind him in the hills. Another mile, and he was trudging with his coat-collar up. Soon the rain, which at first was but an angry scatter, began to thud down in earnest. Swiftly it changed to a torrent, and Claud was fain to look about him for some kind of shelter. Fortunately he recognised his whereabouts in spite of the cimmerian darkness. He remembered having seen an open cart-shed by the roadside a few hundred yards from where he stood. Going off at the double, he just managed to crowd breathless into this friendly haven, when the black sky seemed to split asunder and let down an atlantic of roaring water upon the earth.

On his entry, Claud had stumbled against a cart-shaft, and feeling his way up this, he sat, or rather leaned, upon the slanting beam to recover his breath. No sooner had he done this, however, than an odd sensation came over him that he was not alone in the shed. His eyes were useless in the intense darkness, and the clamour of the falling rain outside annihilated all other sounds. But by some super-sense or other, Claud became convinced that he shared his shelter with another human being. And

not only that. The person, whoever it might be, man or woman, was very near to him, sitting possibly on the other shaft of the cart.

Not averse to companionship under such dismal conditions, Claud set about friendly overtures. While the deluge held on, it was in vain to make any attempt at conversation; but after a few minutes a lull came in the dynamic fury of the torrent, and he essayed a polite word or two.

"I am afraid," said he, addressing the adjacent darkness, "I am afraid we are going to be fellow-prisoners for some time to come. The storm, I think, is passing over to the hills, but we are in for the longest and wettest part of it."

There was a pause, a slight cough, and then the answer came in a decidedly feminine tone.

"Yes, sir. 'Tis real unlucky for the poor working-folk that couldn't get to the Fair till night."

They were simple words enough, uttered in the common country speech with which he had been so long familiar. But they served to drive the hot blood in and out of Laughton's face, leaving it for a moment deathly cold. The voice might have been an echo of the very thought within his heart. Straining his eyes, he could just make out a dim spot in the gloom, which he now knew to be the face of Elisabel March. It was plain, from her tone, that she had not recognised him.

"Are you going to the Fair, then?" he asked, as soon as he could steady his voice.

But now the torrent raged down again as wildly as ever, and her answer, if she made any, was lost to him. When the next lull came in the strife, he found she had moved from his vicinity. Her voice sounded from the other end of the shed. It was not, however, addressed to him.

"Quiet, Blossom! 'Twill never harm ye in here, old

leddy! What are you feared of? Here! take your bite and bide still!"

There followed a noise as of some animal contentedly munching. Presently, from the slight creak and tilt of the cart-shafts, Laughton knew that Elisabel had returned to her former seat.

"What have you got there?" he asked her, after a short silence; and she set his heart thumping again with the sweet laughing freshness of her voice.

"Oh! 'tis only our old donkey! She is mortal feared of storms. If it hadn't been for her, we should all have been home in Whinbury long ago—her, and me, and the caart. We are coming back from the Fair, not going, you know. Are you bound for Stavisham, sir?"

The tremulous excitement which had so strangely seized upon Claud, when he realised the identity of his companion, was now giving place to jubilation at his wonderful luck. He laughed.

"Well, not exactly; at least, not through a rain like this. And it looks as though it had set in for hours, does it not? I am sorry to have forced my company upon you both in this way. Do you think you and Blossom can put up with me for a while?"

"Oh! Blossom! she's not very particular, only when it's other donkeys. And I was getting real lonely, and—and——"

"And what? Not frightened too?"

The cart-thill vibrated with her laughter—not, he judged, suppressed for the occasion, but laughter habitually controlled, subdued. There was something in its quiet merriment that infected him irresistibly. He laughed with her, without knowing or caring why.

"Won't you tell me?"

Elisabel became suddenly grave. The shaft canted over a little. She had risen and stepped to the extreme

verge of their shelter. Against the slightly less intense darkness outside, he could just make out her slender, yet well-curved figure, with its finely-squared breadth of shoulder, as she peered forth at the hopeless night.

"Oh! if 'twould only give over, just for an hour! Blossom! you lucky old Neddy, with your nosebag full! Why, I believe I could eat even your old beans and chaff!"

Claud started to his feet.

"You don't mean to say you are hungry?"

Again that wonderful laugh began to shake the air, like the churring of a fern-owl in summer-dark. With a gasp, her unknown companion fell to rummaging in his pockets. Elisabel heard the rustle of paper and the chink of glass.

"Here you are, my dear!" he cried to her delightedly. "Biscuits galore—rather smashed, I am afraid, but plenty of them. And honey-samples! Dig it out of the little pots with this penknife. I am holding them all out to you now—that's it! Now the knife!"

His fingers had just touched hers as the transference was effected, and again he was shaking like an aspen—flushing, he knew, to his hat-brim—glad for the first time that it was so dark.

It was a situation of undiluted enjoyment to Claud. Elisabel on the cart-thill so close to him, Blossom a little farther away, and from each much the same note of contented mastication falling like a charm upon his ears. Each also gave out from time to time a note that was gratitude translated elementally into sound—from the one a little satisfied murmur, from the other a wheezy grunt.

Claud sat for a while in silence, designing to let the girl break what had evidently been a long fast. The thunder no longer growled in the hills; the worst of the storm

was over. But the rain still drummed steadily down outside, and the darkness seemed more profound than ever. Claud listened to the song of the water as it coursed in little rills and freshets all round him, and he breathed a blessing on every drop that fell.

Elisabel, however, was no friend to silent repasts. She revealed to him now her amazing faculty for eating, talking, and laughing all together.

"'Tis onaccountable good of you, whoever you are," she said. "What wonderful pockets you must have! And 'tis real fine honey, all of it; but the best of all in the littlest jar. Oh! I know!"

The biscuits got the better of articulation for a moment, but her merry voice was soon rippling on again in his greedy ears.

"Fancy your coming by just when I most wanted you! And what a story to tell mother! She'll never believe it, at least not the honey part. You see, that is the most curious thing of all. We—that is, I—oh! we have lots of beeves ourselves over in Whinbury——"

She came to a dead stop.

"But did you call them honey-samples? *Samples?*"

There was something in the way she emphasised the word that brought him a shock of warning in the midst of his easy rapture. Instinctively he cast about for a safer subject for talk.

"Did I?" he said carelessly. "I forget; perhaps I did. I am glad of your opinion about them——"

He stopped to listen. Here was a diversion, as lucky as unexpected.

"I think there is something coming along the road," said he. "Cannot you hear wheels?"

They listened together. Above the sibilant note of the rain, they heard clear enough the rumbling advance of some vehicle coming from the town. Lights began

to glimmer afar off at the foot of the hill. It was some private conveyance, and that of a distinguished kind, to judge by the brilliant illumination it bore along with it. A few minutes later a big old-fashioned brougham, which both instantly recognised, went splashing and rumbling past, its great lamps momentarily filling the cart-shed with a flood of light.

It was gone the next instant, and the darkness wrapped them about more profoundly than ever. But for those few brief vivid moments Claud and Elisabel had faced each other, and he knew that she had found him out at last.

He waited for her to speak, but not a word did she say. He knew that she had shrunk from him, as though he carried a pestilence. He heard the little honey-jars go clattering to the ground. Staring after her as best he could, he made out that she had passed swiftly to the far end of the shed, where the old donkey was still contentedly chewing; that she had ripped off the nose-bag; and that now she was tugging at Blossom's bridle, trying to urge the reluctant beast out into the drenching night.

"What are you going to do?" he called to her anxiously. "You cannot go yet. You will be soaked through before you have covered a dozen yards."

But she took not the slightest heed of him. The one thought seemed to obsess her—to remove herself and her belongings from his detestable presence at once and at any cost. Against the lesser darkness of the sky he could see her leaning outward, putting all her strength furiously into her task. This having no effect on the frightened animal, she seemed to possess herself of the whip, for Claud heard a succession of blows sing sharply down on Blossom's carcase, accompanied by alternate threats and cajolings.

But it was all in vain, it seemed. The timorous brute would not concede an inch. At length she gave it up, threw the whip distractedly from her, and shrank to the farthermost corner of the shed, where she stood breathing heavily, her two hands clenched together over her galloping heart.

Laughton, who, by dint of straining eyes and ears, had kept himself informed of the progress of her efforts, and their ultimate failure, now quietly resumed his seat on the cart-thill. He kept silence for a minute or two, mainly to afford the girl time to regain her composure, but also mentally to record a vow that, if ever it were in his power to reward Blossom with eternal ease amidst knee-deep clover, the thing should be done. And then Claud set himself quietly and deliberately to talk.

"Miss March," said he, "you have given yourself an infinity of trouble, and poor Blossom a great deal of unmerited suffering, all without a cause. For, you know, there really is not, nor ever was, the slightest reason why you should hate me so. Of course I can well understand how it was with the old folk. But you, now! Surely you can see that I do not deserve to be treated like a thief with the smallpox?"

He paused. He knew that she could hear what he said, for the clamour of the rain had somewhat abated. But she neither spoke nor stirred.

"In all the years," he went on, "that your father and I have kept bees in Whinbury together, I never once gave him cause for reasonable complaint. I minded my own business strictly. And if I went up, and he went down, it was only in the nature of things. We were like two sportsmen out for the same quarry, one with a bow and arrow, and one with a modern breechloading gun. Cannot you see that the bigger bag made by the gunner would

be due to superior means, and not to malice aforethought?"

This seemed to him a neat and convincing way of putting the case. He paused to give it emphasis.

"Now see here," he continued, "I want to live at peace with my neighbours, and especially with those who follow my own calling. If, after this, you choose to treat me as an enemy, or at least as a stranger, well—I cannot help it. But you shall choose that course with your eyes open. Much as I respected your father, I knew—and you must very well know—I might just as well have talked to the wind as try to reason him out of his benighted notions concerning me. But I do not intend that you yourself shall misunderstand me too. I know that you are going to carry on the work of the old bee-garden; perhaps I know even better than you what an up-hill job you have before you, if you keep blindly to the old ways. Well, I tell you now that, far from wishing to see you fail, I have the greatest desire for your success. I wish you not ill, but well, with all my heart, and I could prove that to you, if you would only let me. Will you not give me the chance, Miss March? I could help you in a hundred different ways. There are scores of little things in the day's work that I could explain to you, and that would make all the difference between profit and loss at the season's end. Bee-keeping! why it is science, and art, and business all combined!"

From old habit, without being entirely aware of the act, he had been slowly filling his pipe as he spoke. Now he drew matches from his pocket and struck a light. As he sat gazing down into the kindling bowl, the girl turned first a stealthy half-glance, and then a long intent look upon him. He threw the spent match out into the darkness and sprang to his feet.

"Well, you must think it over," he said in his clear,

leisurely, refined voice. "But now the rain has almost stopped, and Blossom may be in a different frame of mind, if you try her again. Perhaps I can persuade her. Do let me?"

Forthwith he seized the donkey by the bridle, turned her and the cart completely round, and backed the whole dilapidated ancient affair out into the night. Elisabel followed, mute as ever.

"Have you got a lamp?" he asked. "Oh, here it is! One of the Guy Fawkes pattern, I see. I wonder if it will light!"

He struck another match, coaxed the wick of the lantern into flame, and stepped quietly back on the path. She started to lead the donkey along the road towards Whinbury, but stopped almost immediately, and gazed back.

"Thank you!" she said half gratefully, half defiantly.

Under the yellow lantern-glow he got what he had not dared to hope for—a long, steady look into her eyes—coal-black they seemed in the dim light.

"You have nothing to thank me for—yet," he said.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. PETHERWAY AT HOME

TEA in the drawing-room on Thursdays was perhaps the only ungrudging concession to modernism Mrs. Petherway ever made, though she had held out against the new-fangled town habit of At-Home days long after all other genteel residents in Whinbury had adopted it.

On other days of the week, the family gathered at tea-time round the old oak table in the dining-room, making this one of the principal meals of the day. Each member arrived at table in the clothes and condition due to the work of the moment. The farmer wore usually his drab smock-frock, to which ancient garment of his youth he still obstinately clung, in spite of the protestations of his expensively-educated children. He left prong or weeding-spud in the entry, and sat down to table, giving off the fragrance authentic to the particular work he chanced to be supervising—the scent of the rick-yard, the bullock-close, or of fresh-turned furrows. Nuncheon-time, he called it, and it was to nuncheon that the stroke of five brought Mrs. Petherway from dairy or poultry-yard in her plain stuff gown and curtain-bonnet, as often as not wiping her hands on her apron as she bustled to her place behind the sepulchral tea-caddy and the steaming copper urn.

On these days a great cheese on a platter took the centre of the table, side by side with a mutton-ham. There was apple-pie, with top and bottom crust, to follow; and a multitude of other solid farm-house goodies—seed-biscuit, and plum-heavies, cream and coager-cake.

But on Thursdays a different order prevailed at Whinbury farm-house. Company-tea in the drawing-room meant best clothes, and holding things perilously in one's lap. It meant chintz-covers to be removed from furniture, and fly-gauzes from mirror and chandelier. It meant flower-vases to be filled, and the old Derby tea-service to be got out of its glass corner-cupboard; queer dilettante pastry-cook work interfering with sounder enterprises in the kitchen, and the unbarring of the great house-door, to afford ceremonial entry to visitors.

But, to the farmer and his wife at least, it meant something more serious and embarrassing still. It meant a temporary abrogation of all habitual channels for speech and thought. Mastication and imbibition were bereft of their wonted hearty practical significance, and became mere bites and gulps interlarding sumptuous converse. Mrs. Petherway would drink with her little finger in the air, and the old farmer keep anxious watch for crumbs in his beard. For all that, however, when Thursday afternoon came round, Farmer Petherway changed his boots and donned a coat with easy resignation, if not with relish; and Mrs. Petherway put on her black silk gown and finger-rings with a sober thrill of delight.

It seemed that the storm, which had swept the country on Stavisham Fair-day, had broken the fine weather, for it was succeeded by days of gloom and steady rain. And when Thursday in the week arrived, things were no better, though that did not mean a diminished company for Mrs. Petherway's At-Home. Rose, sitting in the window-seat, glum, silent, out of spirits, as she always

was when weather-bound, could think of hardly any lady of social consequence in the neighbourhood who was absent, despite the downpour and the mud.

A buzz of talk and tinkle of teaspoons pervaded the roomy but low-pitched apartment. Where Rose lounged in the cushioned recess behind the window-curtains, various scraps of conversation came floating over to her: she listened to them all with covert disdain.

"I can tell her what to do, mum!"—it was Farmer Petherway's rich husky tones breaking a mournful recital from the group on the sofa—"You gets half-a-pound o' poppy-heads, putts them in a basin, and pours bilin' water over them. Then you houlds your head——"

"Oh! but my dear Mr. Petherway, think who 'tis!" Little Mrs. Barrs, the miller's wife, turned sad, glistening eyes on the old farmer. "Sabie—did you ever know her take advice from anyone? No! she will go on suffering an' lose every tooth in her head, rather than be beholden to them as really knows things, though they don't set up to rule the parish."

"'Tis very trying, no doubt, to poor Mr. Jenyns," observed Mrs. Petherway. "Sabie sound and well is handful enough, as we all know. But Sabie wi' th' toothache a week on end! I wouldn't fer worlds ha' Petherway take note as I saw un go crisscross agen at Communion on Sunday—no, not while th' poor man be so plain worritted in his mind."

"I have heard to-day, my dear, quite a startling piece of news."

It was Mrs. McCray's voice, all prattling gaiety, coming from the corner where she sat wedged in with her three eldest daughters, the whole contingent industriously knitting. Rose turned upon her a languid eye.

"A really absorbing item of intelligence, I am sure you will all agree. And I think"—Mrs. McCray looked

archly towards the window-seat—"I think Miss Rose will be particularly interested."

Rose Petherway sat up sharply to listen. Mrs. McCray smiled round the room until she had gathered in all eyes and stilled all tongues.

"Dugald heard it from Captain Brent this morning, when he was sketching up by the old weir. What might you think? Well: you will never guess! They have had a letter to say the young doctor has been down with fever in Penang, and now he is on his way home to stop in Whinbury perhaps all the summer, to get his health back."

"What's that you say?" cried the farmer. "Stephen Brent wi' fever! Ha, ha, ha! The biter bit!"

It was his uproarious, open-air laugh, and it had no business in the drawing-room on Thursdays. Mrs. Petherway's dull blue eyes beseeched him.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry for the poor young gentleman," she said, perceiving Rose's return to her slack, bored mood. "An' Lucy, whatever she will do wi' 'un all that time, I caan't think! Only the two bedchambers, an' th' poor old captain allers restless at nights. Dear, dear! I must see what can be done! I'll lend Lucy the trundle-bed, an' a few extra things perhaps——"

"Stuff! my dear! You will only offend them." It was the elder Miss Welby who spoke. "Doctor Brent is a sailor, and can make out anywhere. Besides, he draws very good pay, and has no one to spend it on but himself. As far as that goes, he will be very useful down at the 'Moorings,' I'm thinking."

Having delivered this in her usual sour, rasping way, she closed her mouth like a trap, and tried to look as uncharitable as possible. But her kindly, tender old eyes belied the hard wrinkles at her mouth-corners. Miss Dittemia Welby, the younger of the two rich elderly

spinsters from Castle House, brought her fat hands together with a little delighted clap.

"But oh! my dear Jane!" she cried to her gaunt sister, "will it not be rather nice, don't you think?"

"What, what?"

"Why, Jane, dear! To have a doctor resident in the village. Stavisham is so far away, and I have often thought, on a sudden illness, one might die long before——"

Miss Jane Welby uttered a stern snort.

"Nonsense, Dittie! Whenever will you grow up! Doctor, indeed! A fine fat living there would be for a man in a place where everybody reaches eighty, and never a microbe from one year's end to another. He could not live out of Mrs. March's asthma and Sabie's toothache."

"Ah! poor Selina March!" sighed Mrs. Petherway. "It do seem a'most a sin to gie her washing. But wi' poor Caleb March dead an' gone, what be 'a to do? I ha' no patience wi' Elisabel. To throw up her situation in Marshminster, an' then refuse a good place here as was offered her only by way o' kindness, an' her never really wanted."

"You've forgotten something, mother!" For almost the first time since the company had got together, Rose put in her word. "Why, Elisabel March is going to work miracles with Caleb's bees, everybody is saying. You should have seen her selling her skeps at the Horse Fair! And she has cleaned up the old garden beautifully down there. Perhaps the bees will make enough to keep the three of them, now that the hives are no longer smothered up with docks and nettles and rubbish."

"Well: I do hope and trust——" Mrs. Petherway began.

"What's the good of hoping and trusting?" rapped out Miss Jane Welby. "Hope and trust never yet boiled anyone's pot. A little gumption is the thing, and I

believe the girl has got that; or at least her fair share of artfulness. Now the old gentleman has gone, she may have the sense to send his antiquated ideas packing after him, and keep her bees in the proper way. She'll starve if she don't."

"And what," asked Mrs. McCray, in her soft Caledonian sing-song, "what, now, might Mr. Laughton have to say to it all?"

"Oh! I can tell ye summat about that!"

Mrs. Barrs capped her sharp elbows with her brown-mittened hands, and shed a chastened, hollow-eyed glance round upon the company.

"Barrs—you know how 'a allers tries to help folk? Well 'a stepped up to th' Bee-Barn soon after Caleb was gone, and 'a said to Mr. Laughton, 'Why don't ye buy up th' ould skeps, and ha' done wi' it? Ye'll get them cheap,' 'a said, 'jest your own price, belike, an' then there'll be no one agen ye in th' whole parish.' But Mr. Laughton, 'a said, 'Barrs, what can I do? I don't want them,' 'a says, 'but if Mrs. March needs the money, I'll take them willingly, and gie her all she asks. But Lor', Barrs! 'tis more'n my life's worth to go near the place, even by way o' kindness!' Ay! that's just how 'tis with the Marches, an' how it allers will be."

Miss Jane Welby had listened with quiet contempt and amusement.

"So you want us to believe the girl and her mother have the same foolish notions about Mr. Laughton as the old bee-master had?"

For a moment little Mrs. Barrs squirmed and quailed in her seat under the withering fire of gaunt Miss Welby's eyes. And then she perked up bravely.

"Oh! but 'tis trew, ma'am!" she protested. "Mrs. March, she makes no secret on't. An' as fer 'Lisbel—'let'n come on,' the gell says. 'Let'n do his worst! I be equal

to 'un,' she says. 'Th' ould ways, as wur good enow fer faather, be good enow fer me. I bean't afeared o' no Gentleman-Mysteries, even though they has gurt black eyes and stands six-foot-two!' So you see, Miss Welby, ma'am, plain folk can ha' grounds for their opinions same as them wi' castles to live in."

At the first mention of Laughton, the observant Mrs. Petherway had marked a curious change in Rose. Stephen Brent as a topic of conversation had roused in the young woman only a passing interest; and that the mother had not been slow to perceive. But the sound of Laughton's name produced in her an instant and a permanent effect. Her wandering inattention vanished. Her colour heightened, under what stimulus Mrs. Petherway was at a loss to guess. She desired to believe it pleasure, yet could not fit that motive to it at once: still less so as she watched Rose during Mrs. Barrs' rambling discourse. And now, on the allusion to Claud's village nickname, Rose's demeanour was still more difficult to fathom. Her bright buckled shoe fell to drumming a furious tattoo on the polished floor. She had drawn her upper lip suddenly between her teeth, so as to whiten it. She caught Mrs. Barrs up—with anger, her mother was constrained to believe.

"What nonsense it all is!" she cried. "As if a man of Mr. Laughton's station and breeding would condescend to give a thought to low people of that kind! The old bee-master was mad, as everyone knows, and I should not wonder if this saucy, vulgar girl were as mad as he!"

Now, if Miss Jane Welby had troubled to listen, or even to look towards Rose at this juncture, the rival, and pretty equally matched black and white angels who alternately dictated Miss Welby's utterances, might have found their order of hegemony reversed, vastly to several

people's immediate and future good. But she was too intent on chastising what she deemed to be little Mrs. Barrs' effrontery; and the chance which now offered itself was too good to lose. In fact the miller's wife, all unknowingly, had delivered herself at the gates of the enemy's camp bound hand and foot.

"Mad? Do you mean Elisabel March? No, no, my dear!" Miss Jane Welby had caught Rose's last words without their context. She turned on Mrs. Barrs. The cold steel of her tongue flickered, then plunged hilt-deep.

"So those are the grounds for your opinions, are they, ma'am? That is what you think, is it? Well: the more noodle you! Now, I will tell you something. Far from keeping up the silly vendetta against Mr. Laughton, the truth is that Elisabel March means to be good friends with him. Oh! very good friends indeed! And not only that. I may tell you that she has by no means met with a rebuff in her changed policy. I have the best of all reasons for knowing that the peace between them has already been signed and sealed."

"No! don't, Jane! Jane, dear; no!"

The words came from Dittemia in a horrified, imploring whisper. She tugged secretly at her sister's skirts. But Miss Welby shook her off as a bulldog might shake off an importunate guinea-pig.

"My dear Dittie! Do not render yourself ridiculous! Why should we make any secret of the thing? Besides, people must be brought to their places. It is true, ma'am, what I say; and if you wish to know how I learned it, I——"

"Oh! Jane, dear Jane! Do think before you——"

"Quiet! you silly child! You must know, then, ma'am, my sister and I were driving home from Stavisham on that shocking night after the Fair; and just as we

passed the old shed at the top of Cudlow Hill, our carriage-lamps illuminated its interior, and who should we see but Mr. Laughton and this young woman sitting inside together, as comfortable and happy as could be! Oh, my dear Mrs. Petherway, there was not the slightest doubt of it! We both saw them as plainly as I see you now!"

"Jee—rusalem!" Farmer Petherway's hand came down on his thigh like a whip-crack.

"What! . . . Mr. . . . Laughton? . . . And . . . and . . . Elisabel . . . March?" Between every word Mrs. Petherway stopped to breathe hard, and her dull, wedgewood-blue eyes opened wider and wider.

"Yes, indeed! And I can well believe you are all astonished. So now, Mrs. Barrs, perhaps the next time you set up to——"

A sudden rustle and flurry swept across the room. The door banged. Rose had gone. Dittemia was looking tragic reproach at her sister out of streaming eyes.

"Perhaps—after all——" Into the silence that followed, Miss Jane Welby's voice presently instilled itself like the faint far-off crepitations on a frost-bound winter's night. "Perhaps—yes! it is true we could only see for—for a moment, and—— There is of course the possibility we might have been mistaken. Don't you think so, my dear Dittie? I am sure I should be very sorry if—if it turned out I had maligned Mr.—— No! nonsense!—humbug! Facts are facts!"

She looked fiercely, helplessly round at all in turn, except the miller's wife. And then Mrs. Petherway got abreast of the situation at last.

"Rose," she said with forced calmness. "I'm sure you will all excuse her. She has been a little out o' sorts these last few days. 'Tis the sattery weather belike; that an' not bein' able to go for her ride every day.

Another cup, Mrs. Joye? An' there be half th' folk wi' their plates empty, Petherway! Dear, dear! Where be your eyes?"

By degrees the talk became general again. Half an hour later the Misses Welby's carriage was announced, and the two sisters made their departure. The vehicle, however, had scarcely passed out of view from the drawing-room windows, when it was brought to a sudden halt. A figure under a cascading umbrella had started out from the roadside greenery on Miss Jane Welby's side.

"You are leaving early to-day—you two! What! no rubber this time, Miss Welby? And how will they get on without Dittie's music?"

It was Rose Petherway, apparently in her most cheerful mood, her plump pink cheeks dimpling with smiles, her gold lashes lifting and falling, letting out flashes of merry light from the grey eyes within.

"Oh! I am all right!" she laughed, in response to an anxious inquiry from Miss Dittemia. "It was nothing—being shut up in the house for days on end, perhaps. Just a little faintness and giddiness for the moment, that was all. The vapours, our great grandmothers called it, didn't they?"

"My dear Rose!" Dittemia remonstrated, "I am afraid you will get soaked through in this pouring rain if——"

"Never mind. I'll go in directly. But I wanted to let you know before you went that Lockley's in Stavisham keep that mauve knitting-silk you liked so. But mind how you wind it—it tangles horribly."

She put a hand in at the carriage window.

"Well: good-bye. I have a great mind to come with you, but mother wants me, I know. I'll be down to see you before very long."

She stepped back, waving her hand: but, as if on a

sudden thought, drew close again. She thrust head and shoulders in.

"By the by, Miss Welby, when I was so silly just now, you were saying something—were you not?—about Mr. Laughton and—and someone else—that March girl, I think. So you really believe they have buried the hatchet at last? Poor old Caleb!—it is enough to make him turn in his grave!"

The careless laugh she said it with, found no echo within the buff-cushioned, roomy old barouche. Miss Jane Welby turned upon her a look of grim anxious scrutiny.

"I have been a meddlesome, vinegar-tongued old fool, Rose, and that's a fact. Forgive me, can you? I was not at the dance, you see."

The stare, the sudden surprised smile, with which Rose countered this, deceived neither of the sisters.

"My *dear* Miss Welby! As if I cared a brass farthing! But it must really have been very funny! King Cophetua, you know, and the Beggar Maid! Were—were they sitting quite close together, like—like sweethearts?"

"H'm—well!" Miss Jane Welby looked at Rose's trembling lip, and her heart smote her more and more. "Well, my dear, I dare say it was but a chance meeting. Adversity makes queer comradeships sometimes. Oh, no! I saw nothing but two people trying to amuse each other. And now run back to the house as fast as you can: the rain is beating all over you. Now, go this instant, or I shall get angry! Home, Jervis! Double quick!"

CHAPTER X

THE MAN AND THE MOMENT

HOW the wind roared, and how bravely the Maytide sun shone, and what a deep, joyous note from the hives came drifting into the little wash-house of the March's cottage!

Elisabel and her mother stood at the trestle-bench, with a great tub full of soapsuds and bellying linen between them. They could see little of each other for the steam that filled the place, but now and again a stray gust of wind found its way in by the open door or window, raking the little room fore and aft, and momentarily revealing to each a scarlet, cheery, faithful face, and bare, strong arms at war with the squelching linen.

And with every minute that passed, it seemed, the sunshine fell hotter and brighter; the music from bees and birds in the old garden took on a fuller, sweeter strain; the south-west gale drew from the elm-tops by the roadside a more thunderous organ melody. It was a morning when all the world of green and blue and gold seemed rushing onward towards summer fulfilment; when sunshine was a living, urging power; growth of flower and green leaf an almost visible process; the termagant wind but a sign of the new momentum in all things. Elisabel hearkened to the raging gale and the rich under-flow of song without; and would gladly have taken wing with any of her madcap bees, lancing straight

over the village roof-tops to the hillside that glowed with yellow kelk a mile away.

But sterner, less romantic business held her indoors. It was what they call "heavy" day in Mrs. March's occupation. All the larger articles—the sheets and coverlids and blankets—were to be dealt with that morning. The old woman could manage the smaller gear by herself, and then Elisabel was bee-mistress and no more; but these big guns needed the pair of layers. Between them they dollied and pounded the great sheets, wrung them into dripping hawsers, coiled them into the baskets ready to be carried out for the sun and wind to play their final part.

Yet, for all her cheerful look and bright tongue, Elisabel sighed to be out at the task she loved, though with every sigh she worked the harder. The piles of smoking white napery steadily grew at her feet. About her head the wind drove the dense steam hither and thither. Now and again she sang a verse or two of some old country ditty, or met her mother's quaint talk with quainter sallies of her own. But it was Elisabel's hands and tongue only that were busy in the wash-house that bright May morning. Her thoughts, her big, dark eyes—at once vivid and dark, like the intense blue of winter twilight—were for ever following her bees away to the gold-clad hill.

Of late, under the inspiriting influence of Elisabel's companionship and care, Mrs. March's health had greatly revived, and the old woman was fast getting back her native sprightliness and vigour. But this morning, though she was cheerful enough, Elisabel could not fail to mark that her cheerfulness had odd interjections of mute gravity, during which she would look at the girl in a doubting, questioning way. It was in one of these fits of silent inspection that Elisabel caught her glance, and merrily challenged her.

"Is it my hair all over my face, or what, mother?" she laughed. "Or must I go and put on a bodice? Oh, dear! 'tis so hot, and I caan't abide clothes!"

Mrs. March looked the girl quietly up and down, admiration for her supple strength and beauty slowly gathering in her creviced eyes. Elisabel presented, indeed, a figure of unconventional, almost savage picturesqueness. Standing with hands poised on her hips, her dark head lifted high, the fine, full curves of her bosom veiled yet revealed by the thin cotton singlet which alone she wore above her tucked-up blue serge skirt, she made a picture of unstudied grace, natural and free as the wind and sunshine that played about her. Mrs. March's eyes disappeared as her fat cheeks wrinkled up in a smile.

"Noa, gell!" said she thoughtfully, "'tis not th' looks o' ye; ner yet th' tongue o' ye. Though 'tis real onaccountable, the way ye have shed th' Marshminster talk, an' got back th' trew country manner o' speakin'. Na, na! ye be right enow; an' glory be to Him as made ye so good to see!"

She plunged her arms again busily into the seething tub.

"'Lisbel," she went on, after a few moments' silence, "'tis a fine time, that as comes atween gell an' woman—a brave time; an' it allers looks as if 'twould laast fer ever. But it wunt, 'Lisbel. A growed maid ye be; an' sech a maid as 'ull ne'er bide long unner th' ould folks' roof-tree; 'tis but the nateral way o' things. Soon or late, summum be sure to come along, an' make a lonely ould woman o' me."

Elisabel laughed scornfully.

"No, indeed, mother!" she cried, straining at the great rope of steaming, spluttering linen, as they wrung it out between them. "Ha' no fear o' that, deary! You an' me, an' Rachel up there—'tis our part to cling together

through life. There bean't never man alive as could take me away from ye!"

Mrs. March appeared to turn this over in her mind.

"Where," she asked presently, "where be George Lindup's faather's ould Aunt Mary's brooch, 'Lisbel?"

Elisabel gave the sheet a great wrench that sent a shower of water-drops sparkling over their two faces. She laughed again.

"'Tis safe enough, mother—right at the bottom of the great press," she said.

"At th' bottom o' th' press?" Mrs. March echoed. "An' why there, 'Lisbel? Why not out in the light o' day, where ye can see it otherwhiles, an' think now an' agen o' th' trew giver?"

Elisabel was silent. The old woman waited a little, then threw up her hands resignedly.

"Well, well, my dear, I'll let'n bide. A good man 'a be, George Lindup, none better; an' good men be scarce enow i' these rash days. But I'll let'n bide, 'Lisbel; I'll say no more. 'Tis your purvension, child; no one else's. An' now I'll get to peggin' out. Lor'! what a real owdacious wind there be fer dryin'!"

Elisabel helped to carry the heaped-up baskets to the lines, then returned alone to her work at the washtub.

From where she stood, much of the area of the garden was visible, either through the long, low window or by the open door. She watched her mother as she pegged up the heavy sodden linen on the lines that ran all ways about the garden, commending her father's foresight in having the lines of wire instead of rope. They needed to be strong, Elisabel thought to herself, as she saw what trouble Mrs. March had to get each expanse of linen in its place; and how the fierce wind seized upon it at once, blowing it out almost horizontally, and drawing from it a slattering, thudding tune. As the long wires slowly

filled with their burden, this noise became paramount over all others. The song of the birds and bees hushed away. Even the roar of the wind in the tree-tops was scarce audible amidst the incessant deep cannonade from the threshing linen.

A wise old man was poor father, thought Elisabel pridefully, as she bent to her work. And in the midst of her calm surety and trust in the stout wire-lines—that would indeed have borne a strain of many tons above their present load—something happened that in a moment marred the fair face of things. A cry resounded from the garden, echoed at once by Elisabel's own, as she beheld its cause. Mother and daughter had both forgotten that the great ash-posts, strong enough when they were put in twenty years ago, could not last for all time. A moment must come when stress of weather and the rotting moisture of the soil would overcome them, and for one at least that moment had arrived.

The big post half-way down the garden, from which radiated three or four of the longest, most heavily burdened lines, had gone at its base, and was slowly canting over. A moment or two longer, and the whole morning's work would be down in the mud and ruined. To avert this disaster, Mrs. March was striving with all her power to hold the post up, and calling frantically for Elisabel the while.

It was little her wheezy voice could avail against the din the wind was making, but eyes rather than ears had acquainted Elisabel of the threatening peril. With one bound she was at the door. The next instant she had stopped, shrunk back again. A crashing sound of hedge-breaking reached her ears. A tall figure shot in a swift diagonal over the intervening thicket of potato-tops. Claud Laughton had gripped the slowly yielding post by the middle, and planting both feet at its base, was straining backwards with all his might.

"Now clear the lines! Clear the lines as quick as you can!"

Like a succession of pistol-shots his words rang out above the din of wind and lashing linen.

"'Lisbel, come an' help!" screamed Mrs. March, as she laboured at the great sheets, tearing them down, and sending the pegs flying hither and thither.

"The long line, Miss March! That's it! Quick's the word! I can hold for exactly a minute longer!"

The words were uttered in a sort of serene, breathless shout. He was smiling, but the veins had swollen up like cords in his scarlet face and neck, showing the tremendous strain that was on him. The two women flew about their task. A few moments more, and the weight upon the post began to ease. His voice cracked out again.

"Miss March!"

Elisabel came flying towards him.

"Take that rope there! Tie one end round the big apple-tree behind me! Now bring the rope over tight, and make two turns on the post here just above my hands! Good! Now back again with the rope to that other tree, pull as hard as you can, and make fast! Well done! We'll soon get everything right now. Where can I find more rope, and some stakes and a mallet?"

Following the indication given him, he was soon back with the articles, and a few minutes more saw the post scientifically guyed and fit for renewed service.

Claud at length rose to his feet. Behind him stood Mrs. March alone; for, while he had been intent on the work, Elisabel, suddenly recollecting her unconventional raiment, had precipitately retreated to the house. Claud looked at the old woman's red chubby face, and misread the cast upon it. He hesitated, then raising his hat slightly, turned and made off down the garden-path.

"Oh! no, no! Lorey me! No!"

Mrs. March had come panting and calling after him. "Not a bit on't!"

Her eyes flashed with what Claud at first took to be anger at his intrusion, opportune though it had been. But he was soon joyfully undeceived.

"Maast' Laughton, sir! I'd be real ashamed if—if—— Bide a minute, will ye? whiles I gets my breath!"

The damson-tree offered its friendly shade hard by, and she sank down on the seat beneath it. Claud stood before her blushing like a schoolboy, his heart singing with all sorts of new possibilities.

"I am sure it was nothing at all——" he began.

"Nauthin'!" Mrs. March looked him up and down with the eye of a mother regarding a soldier-son triumphantly home from the wars. "Nauthin? 'Tis six long hours o' work ye've saved me, man alive! An' you, o' all bodies! Oh! Maast' Laughton, sir, what can I say to ye! How can I thank ye, sir! What 'ud ye think o' me if—if I let ye goo like that'n, an'—an'——"

Her words tailed off into a medley of wheezes and gasps. But, as she sat beating her ample bodice with both fists, the narrow blue slits in her bonny old face continued to beam forth the gratitude which she could no longer articulate. Claud sat himself quietly down by her side.

"It would be a lucky day for me, Mrs. March," he said, after a while, "a real lucky day, if it turned out to be the beginning of a better feeling between us all. Believe me, it has been no end of a pleasure to do you a service, although so small a one. And I should have been more than glad to have done the like any day these ten years back. But cannot we forget all past misunderstandings now? If we could strike up a friendship after this, it would please me more than anything."

"Ay! that we will!" cried the old woman. "What ye've done wur real proof o' kindness, let aloane as no two

other men i' th' parish could ha' had the strength to't! Fegs! Maast' Laughton, what a woman your mither must ha' been!"

She got upon her feet, fired with a new idea.

"Come, now!" said she. "There be Caleb's ould mead, as ye ha' never tasted; an' th' ould methers to drink it out o'. Maast' Laughton, ye be th' only man i' Whinbury as has ne'er dipped bill into 'em. Come along, sir; come right in!"

He followed her up the path to the house. He went soberly, catching some of the ceremonial spirit with which it was plainly Mrs. March's design to admit him under her roof; but he could have leaped and laughed as he went, for very joy at his sudden turn of luck. The old woman left him outside the closed front-door, and disappeared round the corner of the house; but in a moment she opened the door to him from within, backing before him as she smilingly invited him to enter.

The door gave directly into the best parlour, and Claud looked about him much as Aladdin must have gazed round at the treasures in the magician's cave.

There were white dimity curtains to the window, spotted with pink rosettes. A row of geraniums on the sill almost obscured the view through the diamond panes. On the table was a Family Bible, covered with a bead mat; and on the mat stood a coral-basket of wax flowers under a glass dome footed in red chenille. The arm-chair, to which Laughton had been conducted, as well as the sofa and other chairs, was covered in gay-coloured chintz. On the walls hung various prints and oleographs in home-made frames. The chimney-glass was draped in cut silver-paper, and stood on the mantel behind a row of vases, principally fairings, of every conceivable date, shape, and hue. In the fireplace beneath, appeared more cut paper like a pea-green waterfall apparently rushing

down the chimney, and carrying with it innumerable stars of gold and silver tinsel.

Left for a moment alone in the room, Laughton's eyes wandered over each of these objects in turn, and he would not have exchanged his present quarters for the reception-hall of a king's palace. By the time Mrs. March came panting and smiling back with a cobweb-wreathed bottle and one of the ancient drinking-mugs for mead, called methers, he had arrived at a full comprehension of all the wonders that had happened for him on that wonderful morning, and was bent on making the most of his chance.

It was an easy, confident gentleman who stood up as the old woman entered, regarding her with a friendly sparkle in his dark, serious eyes. He pointed to the single drinking-cup she had brought with her.

"Now, Mrs. March," said he, "that will never do. That will only be making a one-sided bargain of it. Come!—there must be two of those—no, three!—for we cannot leave the bee-mistress out of our compact. Do persuade her to come!"

Through the inner door Laughton watched the obese old woman as she traversed the length of the passage into the sunny kitchen at its far end. He heard a whispered consultation, and apparently some objections overruled. Then the square of sunshine blocked out with two advancing figures. Claud's heart bounded. A moment later, and the thing that had seemed the least attainable of all others in his life, was really happening. Elisabel March's hand was in his own, and she was returning him friendly glance for glance.

If speech at that juncture had been for Claud the sole alternative to instant execution, a flame-visaged, silent man must have been carried there and then to the block. He could only look at the girl in a sort of trance of mingled worship and wonder. Short as the time had been

since he had beheld her in the garden, straining at the rope, bare-armed, her hair flying in the breeze, it had sufficed Elisabel for a veritable transformation. She appeared now in a dainty white muslin blouse with a knot of black ribbon at the neck. The old blue serge skirt had vanished, and given place to a garment of the flowing Marshminster type. The unruly tresses were back in their proper stations about face and neck. She looked cool, collected, as she met his eyes with an affability that was undeniable, but in which there was a touch of defiance he did not fail to note. It was an echo, he thought, of her mood when they had parted on the night of the Horse Fair; and on that disquieting perception his tongue got free of its leash.

"I hope," he said, as presently they were sitting together and the mead was tumbling into the cups like mingled gold-dust and foam, "I hope Blossom has got over her fright after being out in that terrible rain."

He had spoken quite casually, and was surprised at the look his words drew from Elisabel. An almost imperceptible shake of the head that followed, told him that nothing of the incident of the meeting in the cart-shed had been related at home. Claud promptly went about on another tack. He began to talk of old times in Whinbury, of the day he first came to the village, and what an uphill fight he had had of it to commence with. His design was to convince them of the truth, which he himself was well aware of, that he had never in any way interfered with the old bee-master and his trade. It would be difficult, he knew; but he saw, if there were to be a real reconciliation between them, certain misconceptions as to his past doings must be finally cleared away.

"I am free to tell you now," said he, "what I would long ago have told you, if the chance had been given me. The first thing I did when I set up bee-keeping in

Whinbury, was to find out where you sold your honey, and I took care that never an ounce of mine went to the same places. Is it not true, Mrs. March, that all the old bee-master's trade was done hereabouts, or in Stavisham? Well, so I found out right at the beginning. To be on the safe side, indeed, I drew a ten-mile circle round Whinbury, on the map; and I give you my word that all my business is done, and always has been done, outside that line."

"Poor Caleb, 'a thought very different," observed Mrs. March.

"I know he did. But how was I to convince him, when he would never so much as exchange a word, or even look at me? And then he always believed, I am told, that I used to entice his swarms away from him."

Mrs. March sent the golden liquor foaming hospitably into Claud's cup again. She looked at him with no diminution of good will, but she could not entirely withhold from her glance a trace of dubiety.

"Ye never had no swarms o' your own," said she, "an' yet th' stalls up there kep' all on increasin'."

"To be sure they did, Mrs. March," returned Claud earnestly. Here was a point, he saw, in which Elisabel shared her mother's doubts; and he hastened to resolve it. He explained how, by artificial division of each colony just before swarming-time, he anticipated the natural instincts of his bees, and so brought about the same good result, while obviating its drawbacks. Launched thus on his favourite topic, the science of apiculture, which he had made first the loving study and then the business of his life, he soon had both his hearers deeply absorbed. He addressed himself in the main to the older woman, but whenever he turned to Elisabel, he found her great eyes fixed on his face, sometimes with blank incredulity, even with a shadow of scorn. But he saw no more of the defiant, combative look.

"There was another thing, Mrs. March," he went on, as he stretched himself easily in the old high-backed chair. "For a long time past the talk about the village has been that the honey-harvest down here in the old bee-garden has been failing. Every year, people told me, it got scantier, and the quality of it got worse. I know this was true, because old customers of yours kept on coming to me to buy honey, telling me the cause of their visit, and of course went away very angry when they found I would not serve them. But why was it that, with every season, my bees were making better honey for me, while yours were doing the reverse?"

Elisabel and her mother exchanged meaning glances. Neither spoke. Claud bent forward.

"Do you think it was pleasant for me, in this superstitious place, to get the name for being a sort of he-witch?" he said with gentle warmth. "I knew what the old bee-master always said. I was supposed to have cast a spell over his hives. Well: there *was* a spell over them, but it was mainly of his own making. All these honey-dew autumns that we have had of late years: they were what turned your honey black. It was none of my doing. Mr. March—he let his hives get too old and foul, and took his honey too late; while I knew the black times were coming, and prepared for them. But that is just the trouble with the old-fashioned way of bee-keeping. It just holds its own when conditions are all favourable; but it goes down at the first stroke of ill-luck."

"Mother and I—we never believed that of you," said Elisabel slowly, as he paused. It was almost the only word she had said since her entry, and the Marshminster accent had miraculously returned. Claud turned to her gratefully.

"And you shall have still less cause to believe ill of me now," he said, "if—if you would let me show you a little

how things can be contrived. Oh! you need not mind taking a word of advice from me, Miss March. Why! the honey-bees and I must have been old friends before—yes! before you were born!"

Thereupon, launched again on his cherished subject, Claud went easily on like a ship before a fair wind and flowing tide.

At first he lay back in the chair, his refined, clear voice filling the little room like a long drawn-out note from an old violin. But presently he began to tell them of bee-keeping in other lands. And then he sat up. His voice grew stronger, deeper, more resonant. He began to talk to them with eyes and hands as well as tongue. He told them tales of the mammoth apiaries in America, where the hives were numbered by the thousand, and where honey-forage ranged by hundreds of square miles: tales of a nation consuming in every year sweets from the hives to the weight of eighty thousand tons.

"And yet, only a few centuries ago"—he was on his feet now, feeling in his pockets for the tobacco-pipe, which was his unfailing stand-by in all moments of excitement—"less than three hundred years back, there was not a honey-bee, nor thought of a bee-hive, in all that great, far-off land. We in old England sent Americans their first bees; and now, in return, they are sending us all sorts of clever notions for bee-culture, and showing us how——"

His eye had chanced to rove in the direction of the clock. He broke off in some alarm.

"But I've wasted nearly all your morning, Mrs. March, and forgotten my own work as well! That is a bad beginning to make with new friends."

He moved hastily to the door. Mother and daughter passed with him out into the wind and sunshine. The old woman had brought a chubby arm out from beneath

her apron and returned his hearty grip; again Elisabel's hand had lain within his own; but he was not in such a hurry, it seemed, as his first words warranted. He stopped, gazing towards the orchard.

"In all the years I have lived so near," he said, "this is the first time I have had a real look at Whinbury beeves." And then his eyes sought Elisabel's. "Will you not take me round the old place, just for a moment?"

She glanced at him in wonder.

"You that know so much," she began falteringly, "you'll only think them a lot of old rubbish——"

"Ay! that he will!" interposed the old woman briskly. "An' I'll get on wi' th' bluin' atweenwhiles!"

Mrs. March had gone into the house. Claud had gained his purpose, and was alone with Elisabel. With one swift, puzzled look at him, the girl turned and led the way towards the hives.

It had been old Caleb March's invariable practice for years past to give each swarm its permanent home close to the spot where it had originally clustered; and as nearly all the swarms pitched on some branch or other in the orchard, it was here that the population of Whinbury bee-garden was at its densest.

Claud followed his guide through a wilderness of bright-hued flowers, dipped with her under the drooping apple-boughs, until she paused beneath one of the oldest trees. Here scarce a breath of the fierce wind reached them. It roared harmlessly aloft in the sheltering cliff of elms that shut in the garden to the south-west; but where Claud and his young guide had ensconced themselves, hardly a leaf trembled. Laughton gazed wonderingly about him.

The ground sloped gently down to the riverside: he could see the water glittering afar off amidst the crowding greenery of willows that lined the bank. Above his head there stretched an almost unbroken roofing of pink apple-

blossom, in which countless bees were humming. Round his feet, against each tree-trunk, all along the hedges with which the orchard was flanked, stood the old hives of straw, each with its company of winged atoms about it. Some of the hives were moss-grown, misshapen with age. Others, of more recent date, were comparatively clean and fresh-looking. All stood on three-legged stalls and were covered over with an indescribable litter of picturesque rubbish—old sacking, broken skimming-pans, rusty pails, odd pieces of tin and bits of rick-cloth, these being weighted down by bricks, stones, fag-ends of timber, anything that would resist the force of the wind when it chanced to blow that way.

Though much of the grass and weeds had been recently cut down, there remained a tangle of wild herbage and shade-loving blossoms close about every stall. The sheer wanton beauty of the place; its scent and glowing tints and melody; the rosy twilight that submerged it, cut here and there by a shaft of gold wherever the sunbeams could struggle through—Laughton had been a clod indeed if he had failed to recognise its worth. But one dominant thought possessed him. The General, who kept him day by day abreast of all the village-talk and news, had told him how things stood with the Marchs. The rumour of their extreme poverty, and of Elisabel's plans to combat it, had been to him long familiar. But now that he saw with what weapons she designed to enter the lists, his heart failed him. He stood rubbing his chin in a dubious silence.

"I knew you would only despise them," broke in the girl after a while, misreading his look. "But you shall see, and all the folk shall see. Faather, 'twas little he could do these last years; and I—I went away from him just when he most needed me. But 'tis not too late. Oh! you shall all see what I can do!"

He stole a look at her as she stood with the pink apple-bloom wreathed about her dark head, a tinge of sunlight warming the pallor of her cheek, her red lips set straight and firm together. She had spoken with determination, almost with passion. For all that, the real anxiety, and doubt both of her own fitness and resources, had been plain to Claud in every word.

"Just see how strong they are!" she went on valiantly. "See how thick they hang about all the doors, so that the flying bees can scarce get in and out. That means plenty of swarms before long. And every swarm means honey. Oh! wait and see, when burning-time comes! Then I will show you. But you do not care. You hate all the old ways, and are only laughing at me!"

"Indeed, I am not," he said; and never spoke a truer word. For ten long years Claud Laughton had been waging war against illusions. In the bitterest of all schools he had learnt something of their power, their imperious call to action, yet of their powerlessness to lead towards any true goal. He knew well that Elisabel had set herself a hopeless task. Of any measure of success, with the antiquated material at her disposal, he could see not a shadow of probability for her. Old Whinbury bee-garden, in spite of its wild sweet loveliness, must pass away, he knew, just as all others of its kind were slowly passing. Its only hope lay in revolution, a complete reversal to modern ways. There and then, if she would but hearken to him, he could show her something of the real magic of modern beemanship; within a month he could have swept away all the useless beauty, and have launched Whinbury bees on as ugly and as profitable a career as his own. But the price neither he nor she could ever bear to pay. Had he willed, he dared not even hint at such a course to her. He guessed, and guessed aright, that Elisabel would look on any such change as

sheer sacrilege to her father's memory. And yet the doubt in her eyes was plain; the tremor in her voice told him more than any words could tell. At once she appealed to him and defied all that she believed he stood for. Well: there was another way.

Claud had not laughed. It was a grave face he turned to her, though the laughter of joy was very near his lips. He had already vowed to Blossom eternal knee-deep clover, and now for a like reason he pledged himself to stand between Whinbury beeves and their imminent, otherwise inevitable fate.

"Indeed I do care," he said to her. "And far from hating the old ways, it is the plain truth that I have always had love and reverence for them, and for this old garden most of all. You will do well enough here. Go on just as you are going. As for me, I have taken up with all these new ideas, and now there is nothing before me but to keep to my chosen way. Yet you could be of great service to me, if you would. Though I am bound now to keep on making a hard, cold, ugly business of my work, the thought that down here you are still going on in the old beautiful way, will be very sweet to me now. And if you could let me come down sometimes, and wander about here, and watch you, perhaps help you, doing things just as they have been done for thousands of years—well, I believe it would make a better, cleaner man of me. Will you let me do this, Miss March? Cannot we two lonely bee-people work together a little like that, and so help each other, and—and perhaps in time——"

She had been listening, her eyes meeting his unflinchingly. But now she turned away. He saw two spots of crimson start up, and as quickly fade again, in the pearly lustre of her cheeks.

"Yes, I have been very lonely here," she said, "but—but now I shall never feel lonely and—and cowardly again."

CHAPTER XI

A TALISMAN

"The stars are with the voyager
Wherever he may sail,
The moon is constant to her time,
The sun will never fail;
But follow, follow round the world,
The green earth and the sea;
So love is with the lover's heart
Wherever he may be."

"General" John Gates, sitting under the porch of the Bee-Barn enjoying a philosophic pipe, listened to the approaching music with a sensation verging on astonishment. He had heard the song begin far below in the moonlit night, heard it grow nearer, accompanied by the well-known footfall of his master; and now it was coming up the main path between the hives with a swing and hilarity to its refrain, as though it sprang unbidden from the lips of some light-hearted boy.

"Wherever he may be, the stars
Must daily lose their light;
The moon will veil her in the shade,
The sun will set at night.
The sun may set, but constant love
Will shine when he's away,
So that dull night is never——

hullo! General! Sorry I am so late. Is supper ready?"

The General slowly knocked his pipe out, staring the while at the figure which had come to a halt before him against the star-spangled night.

"Ready? Ah! I'd swear to't on th' Book. Ne'er a doubt, maaster! This hour or two forbye. But Lorsh! I couldna believe my ears!"

He followed Laughton to the table, and the pair sat down together to the belated meal.

"And what could not you believe, General?" asked Claud absently, after a while.

"You a-singin', maaster. Never afore, as I can mind, ha' ye gi'en so much as a sparrer-pipe. An' there ye wur chiroodlin' all along th' lane like a gansin' nightingale!"

Laughton regarded the little man with unrestrained bonhomie over the rim of his glass.

"I suppose it is true, more's the pity," he said, after a moment's thought. "No, I don't think I ever did, in your presence. But then I've never had much cause for singing. Jollity and I haven't been too kind friends together all these years, General, so now I am going to make up for lost time."

The General gravely carved a round off the loaf, and adjusted a slab of bacon upon it. At one corner of this he fitted a thumb-piece of crust, and taking the whole in his great hand, proceeded to hack off carefully estimated mouthfuls, staring ruminatively at the floor as he munched.

"Jollity," said he, at the end of some minutes of this mute exercise. "Ah! a good hoss 'a be, a real mettlesome crittur, for the man as an't forgot how to ride un. But when 'a've been long out o' harness, maaster——"

He broke off to look at Claud in obvious concern.

"You mean," said Laughton merrily, "he is likely then to give his rider a bad fall?"

The General shook his head.

"The Lor' o' all forbid," said he, "as I should take upon myself to mean any sech thing, maaster, along o' your bit o' music-makin'. John Gates, he've larned in a rough school. In the army 'tis every man to's own business, strict-like, Maast' Laughton."

He looked long at the candle-flame between them. And then, with apparent inconsequence:

"Lor'! how I do wish there was nought but men-kind i' th' wureld!"

"You're a misogynist, General."

"An' what be that i' common talk, maaster?"

"That? Oh! a woman-hater; a crabbed-up, sour old fellow who's forgotten he ever had a mother, or ever a drop of young blood in his veins."

"Oh! Ha!"

The General went off in a brown study at this. Presently he pointed the blade of his jack-knife at Laughton.

"If I be a—a mis-what-yer-call-it," said he, the troubled look intensifying in his faithful mastiff's eyes with every word, "well an' good, maaster; let ut so be. But 'twarnt very long ago as you yourself—if a pore ould souldjer might be so bold as say it—yer very own self, Maast' Laughton, sir, thought purty much—— Fegs! ye wur a wusser one than ever I be, an' belike had the better cause."

Claud looked at his faithful henchman for a silent moment or two, grew grave, then stretched for his greasy palm.

"It would be an ill return for all these years of friendship and service together, General," said he, keeping the great sinewy, shaggy hand fast in his own, "if either one of us ever had a secret from the other. Yes, I am not the same man I used to be, John. Something has happened in my life of late, and changed me so that I scarce know my own face in the glass. Did you ever go along on a journey

mile after mile under a black sky, with a bitter wind and rain driving in your teeth; and the mud over the top of your boots; and the place you are trying for a weary distance off, with nothing worth having even when you got there, but still you had to keep footing it, sick or well, weary or strong? Well, that was my life, John Gates. And now, listen. It is so no longer. Suddenly the black sky has parted and let down a flood of glorious light. The wind and rain have gone. The road becomes firmer and drier with every step; and with every step I shed a year of life and a sheaf of furrows and wrinkles. Ahead there, over where I am going, there is a patch of blue sky getting every moment wider. To-morrow it may be all blue sky and glad sunshine for me again, just as it used to be before—before——"

It was not lack of breath that stopped him, though it might well have been so. The General's sun-blackened, knotted face blurred in his eyes. Presently a low, twittering whistle uprose, not breaking the silence that had fallen between them, but setting it to music, as it were. The General went softly through two long verses of his favourite martial melody. Then he stopped and recklessly blew his nose.

"'Tis that Maarch gell, bean't ut?" he asked. And, without waiting for reply: "Strikes! 'tis all plain as plain! Here be th' dovecote—I can hear th' cooin' a'ready! An' as fer ould John Gates—bean't he real foreright wi' his hands? An' caan't he run up a helegant little shanty fer hisself down there by th' bee-farm gate, an' be watch-dog as well as hive-tender; ay! an' servin'-man to th' family, an' belike nuss later on, an'——"

"Stop a moment, General!" Claud was laughing now, though he had little better view of his companion than before. "You are going much too fast and too far. The blue patch in my sky is pretty big, but it is not so

big as that yet. And, for all I know, it may come on dark and rainy again. Lord alone can tell."

The General went off in a succession of explosive chuckles. He shook his huge bald head incredulously.

"Na, na!" said he. "You bean't the man to get all on hollerin' about stars an' lovers' hearts an' things, wi'out ye sees the end o' the wood."

No word more was said on this tender subject, though they sat up late together talking over the affairs of the farm, and forming projects for the honey-season, which was now imminent. But even when the General had at last stumbled up the ladder to his room in the eastern bay, Laughton was still not nearly ready for bed. He took his pipe out on the verandah, to stroll up and down there for a little in the faint light of the setting moon, and turn over mentally the course of recent events.

Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since his adventure with the clothes'-post, and hardly an evening had gone by but that he had contrived to get a word with Elisabel, or at least a glimpse of her, either by chance encounters in the village or opportunities deliberately sought.

He had told the General that he hardly knew his own face in the glass, and this was literally true. The revolution that had broken out in his life on his first view of Elisabel March, had fundamentally changed him, both in body and mind. It had had all the sudden violence of a fired mine, and all its unforeseeable consequence. Looking into his own heart now, or looking into his mirror, he saw revolution's counterpart. The dogged, dull, laborious spirit that had carried him through each day's work, and had mere achievement alike for its motive and ambition, had been set back to its true prerogative as a means to an end. Rank undergrowths of cynicism, the accumulation of years, had been miraculously scythed down; and already tender leaf was springing in

the cleansed soil, with promise of true blossom by and by. His old conception of manhood, narrowed down by years of solitude and despondency to bare abstention from mean sins—a half-ironic dallying with rectitude in its elements—had suddenly stood out for the soulless thing it was, and been cast away for an ardency of pure thought and humble, upward striving.

And the little, cracked, three-cornered glass, when he looked in it at the grey beginning of each day, showed him all these inner changes outwardly expressed.

The lines about his mouth were softened, nearly gone. The double cleft between his straight, high brows, that had been growing deeper while time's dreary mechanism ticked off the years, had all but vanished. His eyes had filled with light, and his cheeks with something of the colour of youth. He carried his head up, and squared back his shoulders instinctively as he walked. An impulse to whistle or shout or sing as he went about his work, had come upon him. Old tender songs, long forgotten, returned to memory with new significance in their music. And, most wonderful, most disturbing thing of all, some power had of late driven him nightly to his knees by his bedside, and again in the pearly glow of dawn—he who hitherto had but flung himself down to sleep like a healthy, tired-out dog.

Claud paced the oak boards of the verandah, and in every star that shone above him, he saw but the light from one woman's eyes.

He stopped at the far corner, and looked down through the vine-branches at the village slumbering below. Not a glimmer of lamp or candle was there to lead his glance; but he knew well the direction of the little house with the attic-window pushing up the thatch like a furry eyelid: he did not need eyes to see it now in every curve and line. That had been a wonderful evening. He had

borrowed the miller's skiff, and let the little craft float down on the ebb right in the track of the setting sun, until he had reached the nightingale-haunted willows at the foot of the Marchs' garden. That he had found Elisabel stitching there on one of the moss-grown stems which overhung the water, had not been very wonderful, perhaps, seeing that she had told him of her nightly habit of seeking this retreat. The wonder began when she called to him to disembark, to come and listen to something which he could never hope to hear in his crowded, ugly, factory-town of hives. He had followed her willingly enough, tingling to his finger-tips with the mere joy of being in her presence, going on tip-toe when she hushed him, and bending down side by side with her to listen at one of the oldest and most dilapidated skeps.

He knew what to expect, heard the sound indeed, before even her quick ears discerned it. But he waited until she put up a triumphant finger in the air.

"'Tis the queen piping!" she whispered. "And to-morrow—to-morrow they will throw a swarm, my first swarm! 'Tis a sure sign!"

After that they wandered along the green verge of the river, between the willows and the rustling reeds, he listening, for the most part, while she told him of all her plans for the future; how she had painted up the little donkey-cart, and emblazoned it with her name and calling; how she was going to visit all the houses within the ten-mile radius he had covenanted to leave sacred to Whinbury Beeves; how she would soon be making plenty of money so that her mother might give up work and lead an easy life. But nothing could be done till after burning-time. Everything depended on that, and the honey it would set free for sale. Until then——

She stopped, and looked down the sun-gilded stream, and was silent.

Claud understood. He clutched at the full money-bag in his pocket with a savage impotence. He had never loved money, but he hated it now for being in the wrong place. Almost, because he dared not do what then he longed to do—tell her that all he possessed was hers, and had no other reason or value in life for him—he could have hurled the fat, jingling pouch into the stream.

He got into the little skiff again at last, and she bent over, giving him her hand. The dusk was falling fast. The moon had just lifted her wan golden face clear of the hill-top. Claud kept Elisabel's hand within his own longer than he had ever done before.

"You shame me with your courage," he said, under his breath. "I get chicken-hearted often enough, and I have no one but myself to think of in the world. But you—— How do you keep so calm, and cheerful and confident?"

The light had grown very dim. He could only make out her face above him shining like a lily in the night. He knew she hesitated. She put her hand to her breast.

"What is it?" he asked her.

Still she hesitated. Then she detached something from about her neck, and passed it to him. He saw that it was a little jet cross on a silken string.

"May I keep it?" he said. "Perhaps it will help me too."

But at this she stretched down hastily to recover her talisman. He pushed the little boat off into mid-stream.

"Do let me keep it," he pleaded. "I need it more than you think."

She stood a moment quite still on the bank. Then without a word she slowly turned and went from him. He watched her white dress until it vanished amidst the orchard trees.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOMAN SCORNED

WHEN the steady dip of Claud's paddles had died away in the night, a cloaked figure emerged from the shade of the willow-copse, and hurried off in the direction of the farm.

As she raced along, Rose Petherway kept clenching and unclenching her hands. "He cannot mean anything! It is impossible he should think of her seriously! A common village girl like that!" The sentences escaped her lips in little harsh, breathless interjections as she went. Her cloak caught in the brambles. She tore it fiercely away, leaving a strip of black lace dangling on a thorn, and pressed on at a faster pace than ever. "No! he is just like all other men! They are all alike! He is amusing himself only! But why, why so near home?"

Arrived at the farm-house, Rose went straight up to her room, the first dinner-gong clanging behind her. There was company to the meal that night, and she was horribly late. She found her maid impatiently awaiting her, with all her finery ready laid out. Mechanically Rose sank into the chair before the mirror, and stared at herself as the deft fingers of the woman fell to the work of braiding her hair.

"Stop a moment, Chapman!" Silently fuming at

the delay, the maid stood back. Rose got both her bare arms under the loosened tresses, and lifted them high above her head like a great cresting billow of gold. She surveyed the effect critically. "If he could only see that!" she thought. She let the mass fall slowly, ripple by ripple, watching the smile on her red lips, her cheeks' living carmine, the grey of her big eyes, all shining like jewels through the descending folds. "And that! That would please him!" her lips moved silently. The maid flustered about behind her mistress in despair.

"Miss Rose, ma'am, do give over, and let me finish you! The gong 'ull go again in a moment, an' you still in your petticoat! Oh, dear! oh, Lor'!"

The second gong had come droning up the stairs and had been silent many minutes before Rose was ready. But even then she must halt in passing the great pier-glass. She looked herself over from head to foot, and laughed down the hard lump in her throat. "There is no real danger! It is only a mood of his. I have but to raise my little finger! And then a word, half a word, will do it! Oh! I am so glad I know the very worst!"

She swept from the room, and down the broad carpeted stairway. Chapman, sunk breathless into the nearest chair, heard the *frou-frou* of her silken drapery descend until, on the opening of the drawing-room door below, it was suddenly extinguished in a burst of gay voices and laughter.

A moment later the maid went and peered down the well of the staircase, to watch the company file across the hall to the dining-room. She checked them off two and two.

"Missus an' th' Reverend—Mr. Butter-Scotch McCray an' ould Jane Welby—Maast' Tom an' that fat Amble-down girl—Miss Rose, bless her! along wi'—— Lorey

me! 'tis the Roper feller! Where be the yaller-eyed doctor, then? Oh! there he be, with only Miss Dittemy! An' Maaster last o' all wi' the female Butter-Scotch, a-treadin' on her skirts! Oh! la-la! what'll I do now fer four mortal hours!"

But Rose Petherway sought her bed that night long before her usual time at these festivities. Ere midnight Chapman had her young mistress tucked away in the triumphal car of brass and lace and pale blue drapery, and had received the usual drowsy, incoherent word in exchange for her own good-night.

Hardly had the door closed, however, but Rose was up and pacing the room restlessly. She went to the mirror, and stood there a long while studying herself, as she had done before. The night-light, like a pink, many-petalled water-lily with a firefly imprisoned in its folds, showed her a face that her own sincere, impartial judgment pronounced to be little short of perfection. She turned to the great pier-glass hard by, and drew herself up before it, clasping her hands behind her head. Again the verdict was all favourable: what she saw was, and she knew it, all that sense of man could imagine or desire. With a little, low, bitter laugh of assurance, of renewed determination, she crossed to the davenport in the corner, lighted the candles, and set herself busily to write.

The candles were of scarlet wax, voluted, and patterned with leaves of gold. They stood among a glittering array of silver inkstand, silver pen-tray, silver-mounted paper-rack—everything was of silver, or soft Russian-leather in the sky-blue shade that this bucolic sybarite loved best of all. Even the note-paper was of sky-blue, with silver roses stamped upon it; and as Rose Petherway drew the sheet from its dainty case, it shed upon the air a scent of rose.

"MY DEAR CLAUD," she wrote, then stopped to nibble the end of her quill thoughtfully.

The ink that formed these words was dry long before the next line was begun. But then she dipped and scribbled feverishly right to the bottom of the page without a pause.

"You see I have commenced this note to you in the old way. But really I do not know why. Of late you have made yourself such a stranger, have made of our friendship such a thing of fits and starts, that I almost feel I ought to address you as 'Dear Sir,' or at least 'Dear Mr. Laughton.' But I will return good for evil, and so perhaps shame your High-and-Mightiness into mending your wicked ways.

"Claud, I want to talk to you badly. It is about a matter that closely concerns your welfare, your happiness, even—in a sense—your good repute. I think it would be better if you came to me here—if you met me in the North Garden to-morrow evening. You can let yourself in from the meadow by the little green door that you know so well; and then we can have our chat together without being overlooked, and without much chance of interruption. I will be there at six o'clock, and will wait an hour. If you have not come by then—well, I shall understand. And there will be an end to my responsibility in the matter which prompts this letter.

"Ever your friend,

"ROSE."

She placed the note where her maid would see it in the morning, and, waylaying a recalcitrant sob, blew out the light.

All the day following, Rose Petherway kept within the precincts of the farm. She desired to avoid any chance anticipation of her meeting with Claud, as tending to

minimise one important detail of her plan, which was to appear before him with as many local enhancements of her natural charms as she could contrive.

The place of appointment had been deftly chosen. The North Garden stood some way removed from the house, and was entirely surrounded by a high brick wall. It was the vegetable garden, in fact; but, as with many ancient homesteads in the country, its useful character had been skilfully disguised by a wealth of flowering plants, which bordered every plot. A broad gravel walk bisected the garden from end to end. Midway down this path stood a pergola of jasmine, now in full white bloom; and on each side, for nearly the whole of the way, tall lilies bent their heads together, whispering in the gentle, summer-like air.

Entering the garden by the upper door, as Rose did that evening well before the hour of assignation, she had a clear view down this path, through the arching pergola, to the little green-painted wicket-gate, set like a slab of jade in the brickwork of the far wall.

Though she knew herself to be a full half-hour in advance of the time she had named in her note, Rose Petherway let herself into the gay seclusion of the garden with trembling hand and beating heart. Her eyes swiftly travelled the length of the path, and she could not resist a pang of disappointment at finding no one there. But she laughed this feeling off nervously. She set herself to kill time, pacing to and fro, her white hands linked behind her, her dimpled chin nestling in the spray of Parma violets at her throat.

These violets had been but a final touch in the scheme of her toilet, one she had added only after long and doubting consideration. But once they were fastened in with the diamond brooch, there they were allowed to remain. They had little part or lot, however, in Rose's carefully-

laid plan for self-decoration. She was to wear her jewellery, and she carried so much of it that she fairly glittered from top to toe. A star of diamonds in her hair, bracelets on her fair arms, a treble string of gold sequins to her neck, fingers all stiff with rings, a waist-belt sewn thick with garnets, more garnets in crescent-moons on each of her shoes;—as she paraded up and down between the ranks of lilies in the mild evening sunshine, an incessant coruscation of colour flew from her as though the plain, mouse-grey chiffon gown beneath it all, covered no woman but an electric battery overcharged.

Laughton, entering presently by the farther door, beheld this figure of extraneous glory standing quite still beneath the pergola; and his first feeling was one of astonishment, his next of amusement tinged with a little contempt.

For Rose Petherway, as a magnificent specimen of physical womanhood, he had then, as always, a full appreciation; and had he seen her thus a few weeks before, though privately he might have allowed his cynical humour a little vent at her expense, he would have accepted her at her own declaration, and built upon it, willingly enough, the passing pleasure of an hour

But Claud was a changed man, how deeply changed he then only realised. All her superabundant youth and health, and frankly sensuous beauty; her display of possessions; even the warm clasp of her hand and the still more favouring welcome of her eyes, left him untouched, even a little repelled. He had come to her summons reluctantly, meaning to get the interview over as quickly as possible and be gone. This, and a certain apprehension at the mysterious tone of her letter, were plain in his manner now. Rose dropped his hand precipitately. Her colour heightened.

"You have really come, then?" she said. "I am

glad. It is a little more than I hoped for. Shall we walk?"

For a while they sauntered up the path together in a strained silence, silence that with every moment grew less bearable for Claud.

"You have something to tell me?" he broke out at last. "Something that you have heard about me, is it? Well: out with it, Rose; and let us understand each other."

The almost chilly brusqueness in his tone was quite unintentional, the mere reflex of his state of anxious conjecture. He became aware of it only when he perceived its effect. She stopped and turned upon him with sudden tears in her eyes.

"What has changed you so, Claud?" she cried to him. "Have I offended you in some deep way unknown to me? What have I done to be treated so—so unkindly?"

"There is nothing, Rose. You have done nothing at all. And how have I changed? We are still as good friends as ever, so far as I know."

"Friends!"

She echoed the word bitterly, vehemently. And the sound of her own voice brought her to sudden recognition of the mistake she had made. This was a false beginning, dead against all her carefully thought-out plans. She hastened to repair the mischief.

"Oh! I know I am silly, Claud! And you are not to blame at all: I keep forgetting how absorbed you are in your work from morning to night at this season. It is so difficult for idle women to realise how swiftly time passes with busy men. But you have been a little—well a little neglectful of late, don't you think?"

Claud trod steadily forward by her side, a prey to all sorts of uncomfortable emotions. He had been blind indeed if he had failed to gather the meaning of Rose's words, and bitterly he reproached himself for his past

unthinking folly in making it possible. Yet how was he to answer her now, but in the one way? He believed that, with a woman of her nature, feeling ran high, but never deep. He knew that his old sordid plan for self-betterment through a marriage with her, had been nothing but infamy. Since then, a great awakening had come to him, and a great new light. At all costs he must follow his new destiny, and pain given to this woman now must save her and him a world of pain hereafter. No: he must go on in the way he had begun. He could not reason with such as her. He could only let her learn the inevitable from the course of events. Very gently now he strove to lead her away from the thing that evidently filled her mind, to the object of their meeting, whatever it might prove.

"It is true, Rose," he said, "that I have made only a poor return for all your kindness. But you know what my life is, and you must try to think as well of me as you can. I am too old to reform now. You used to laugh when I called myself a hermit. Yet it is true enough. Loneliness—it has got into my bones; and that is the reason I have made so few new friendships, and soon wear out the old ones. But I am only vexing you with this talk. Tell me now what it is you wished to speak to me about?"

He saw her colour come and go. Once, twice, her lips parted, but no word escaped them. And then she got under weigh.

"Since you will have it so, Claud, I accept the word. I am your friend: good. And how should friendship prove itself when it hears a dear name aspersed—by silence?—silence to the one who bears the name? I, at least, think not. Well: that is why your friend has called you here to-night, as it seems, so unwillingly."

"Go on!" he said, as she paused.

"Go on, yes! But it is not so easy. It is very hard for one who thought—who would have staked everything on—— Oh! Claud, be careful what you do! They are saying such things about you! I do not believe them, but—but——"

"Saying what?" He was beginning to understand. He turned upon her the face of a sphinx in marble, and nearly as cold.

"The stories that are going about concerning you, and—and one of your new friendships! And such a new friend! Claud, I came here to say only one word to you, and that—beware!"

"You mean——?"

He stopped her in her easy saunter, by wheeling right round in her path. A little, hard, mirthless laugh escaped her.

"Of course you know what I mean. These things are common enough amongst the village class, her class. And little is thought of it, or of the natural consequences. But for a gentleman——"

"Wait a moment, Rose!" His face was set hard and white, and there was a stormy glint in his eyes that for a moment blenched her. "Wait! Do you mean people are saying that I have worked some foul wrong on—on Elisabel March?"

She let a minute go by in a well-simulated silence of agitation.

"How can I make it clear to you, Claud? Not that, indeed; nothing in definite words that one might get hold of: really nothing. But—but—— It is the association which is sure to breed all kinds of rumours against you, though I know you at least are innocent. The girl herself—what has been said about her—her conduct when she was living away in Marshminster—not that I believe a word——"

And now he stopped her finally with a laugh that echoed from end to end of the garden. Her baseness was too transparent at last. Up to that moment he would have done or said anything that might temper the wind to this love-shorn lamb; but why should he spare her now?

"Oh Rose, Rose! Give it up! I am not the simpleton you take me for! I have done you wrong, a deep wrong perhaps, in leading you to believe that I could ever be more than a—a friend to you. But you know it was not all my doing, nor even the half of it. I should have been blind and deaf if I had not understood what you wanted from the very beginning. But let that rest. Here is my answer to your mean, cruel falsehood, and to all the scurrilous pack of you! Elisabel March—she is as pure as snow! And I love her—*love her*, do you hear? And I mean to marry her, if she will so honour me and bless me as to join her life to mine!"

Without another word, or even look at her, he wheeled about and marched straight for the little green door in the wall.

CHAPTER XIII

A SWARM IN MAY

"NE'ER a breath!" quoth the General, as he brought his heavy barrow to a halt close to where Laughton was at work among the hives. "Billions o' new green leaves i' th' wureld, an' all stock-still agen th' blue! An' hot!—I don't 'aaf think!"

He sat himself down for a moment on the shaft of the barrow, removed his gauze helmet, and fell to mopping his shiny pate.

"An' jest listen to th' larkses, maaster! An' th' bees a-roarin' like twenty thousand trains i' Clayton tunnel! Ay! an' th' sheep-bells all a-clinglin' an' a-clanglin' on th' Hill! Fegs! what a toon to march along to!"

"Well: march along then, General; or we'll never get to camp by nightfall."

The General got to his feet again at this admonition. But he was in no hurry to be gone on his business. He looked round him at the ranks of snow-white hives stretching away over the green hillside.

"Now, if 'twur my boyhood's time agen, Maast' Laughton," he said reflectively, "an' 'twur jest sech another twelve o'clock on a fine May mornin', why—Gorm!—you an' me, we'd ha' had no peace these two hours forebye. Swarms! Ah! I reckon we would ha' had swarms! The sky would ha' been black wi' 'em.

It would ha' been you runnin' this way, an' me runnin' that; an' wan lot goin' riverward, an' another ower th' Hill, an'——"

The bee-master straightened himself to scratch a sting or two out of his hairy forearm.

"Well; and isn't it much better as we manage things now, General? Here are the bees all hard at work, thinking of nothing but honey-making; while, in the times you remember, they did little else all the month but go off for mad picnics, or hang round the hives in useless lumps. Oh! they were jolly times, of course; and— General!"

"Yes, maaster?"

"I don't mind telling you I heartily wish they were back again for us all."

The General had already gone some yards down the path with his rumbling vehicle. But at this he stopped, and looked back.

"She do look purty among 'em, doan't she?" he remarked; "tall an' straight as a ramrod, wi' her gurt fuzzy wig black as night, and bits o' th' blew day-sky fer eyes all a-shinin', an'——"

"Now then, General! Get to business! There's a fearful lot to do!"

Claud bent himself resolutely to his task, but the next moment he stood up again.

"Yes, she does, John, and no mistake. I dreamed last night that I was a drone in one of her hives. It was just before sunrise: no sunbeams yet, but only a glitter all over the east like crumpled goldfoil. The worker-bees in the hive were beginning to turn out, to fetch the water from the eaves of the dripping thatch, to make the food for the young bees. They were all hurrying over the comb where I lay half-asleep with the other drones, telling each other as they went what a fine day

it was going to be, and how the clover on Whinbury Hill would soon be blowing. But I and the other lazy old drones only snuggled up the closer together in our corner, drowsily saying we might have a turn by-and-by perhaps, when the sun had drunk up the dew.

"And then, when I was nearly asleep again, I heard her coming down the garden, John; heard her dress sweeping the bushes, and heard her voice—it was just like a nightingale singing, very sweet but very anxious—'Wake up, wake up!' she called to the hives. 'Up and out, and make lots of honey for me! You don't know how I want it, nor what it means to us all.'

"And then I crawled to the flight-hole, and took a shame-faced look at her. There she stood, with her dark head up among the apple-blossom, and her red lips bright between her pale cheeks, like two rose-leaves fallen on snow. Yes: she looked pretty, John; pretty enough to eat; but I could have cried at the sight of her. For I said to myself, 'What can I do to help her? I am only a useless drone. I cannot make honey, and I have no wax-pockets, nor pollen-carriers, nor anything but a loud buzz and an outrageous appetite. All I do is to waste what she wants so much. No wonder my dutiful sisters intend to kill me as soon as they can find time.'"

The General had listened with a grave face, but a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"Ah, ha!" said he, as Laughton paused. "Dreamin'—'tis a wunnerful thing, maaster. Now I had a dream wanst, an' I dreamt as how I wur a common souldier a-goin' into battle. An' th' colonel, he sot on a cheer unner a tree, an' kep' all on a-callin' out, 'Have at 'em, men! Present aarms! Forrard-double! Death or glory fer us all!' An' us, we ran on fit to bust. But th' colonel, he sot in his cheer, doin' nauthin' hisself but jest think o' his lady-love"

Claud fell to his task once more.

"Thank you for the parable, General," said he. "But I find these rather distracting times. It is lucky you are so work-sharp yourself. Now I wonder——"

He stopped and gazed down upon the village at the foot of the hill, his eyes roving in the direction they had taken at least a score of times that morning. Claud pricked up his ears.

"Don't you hear something, General?"

They listened together intently. There was the common week-day murmur of life—subdued rumbling of wheels, the voices of children, dogs, poultry; the chime of Joe Fladgate's anvil, and the steady, soft thunder from the riverside mill. All these united, crept up the sunny slope together, to mingle with the highland music of sheep-bell and lark. But now another sound was added to the rest. The General smote his thigh ecstatically.

"An' doan't I love it!" he cried. "An' doan't it mind me o' th' brave ould days afore I ate o' th' Tree o' Knowledge and larned the vally o' ugliness! Yes! 'tis 'Lisbel ringin' her bees—jest i' th' ould way, copper skim-pan, an' door-key, an' all!"

The bee-master's two hands were shading his eyes. Across the intervening gulf of violet air flowed the sound of the ringing, weird and wild as the battle-music of some savage clan. The General took a quick, impulsive step or two down the hill.

"Mortal high it must be, this here swarm o' 'Lisbel's!" he said. "Hark how she be layin' into't! Ah! now 'tis softer! They be comin' down to settle, belike. No! Up agen! Louder an' louder! Lorsh! I do b'lieve they be goin' right away!"

"I can see her now!" cried Laughton eagerly. "She has come into the roadway with the skep hanging from her shoulder, and is moving towards Harbett's Mead.

pounding away with the key and pan as she goes. How pretty it all sounds! Ah! now she is in the meadow, and going along full speed! General! the swarm is flying straight for the Long Wood!"

The General seized his coat.

"'Tis no work fer a woman—climbin' trees," said he, beginning to struggle into the tattered garment. "Ye'd spare me, belike, fer ten minutes, maaster, whiles I runned across to lend a haand? I ha'ant hived a swarm fer many a long year; an'—Lor'!—I would jest like——"

But Laughton had forestalled him, and was already half-way down the path through the bee-farm, pulling on his own coat as he went. He called to the little man laughingly over his shoulder.

"No good for you, General! It would be like giving meat to a tamed lion: and spoil you for ever for correct beemanship. I won't be a great while. Get on to supering Row Thirteen!"

Claud's long swinging stride took him down through the village, and over into Harbett's Mead, within the space of a very few minutes. But by the time he began to traverse the meadow in the direction of the Long Wood, Elisabel had disappeared among the trees, and the ringing had grown very faint and far away. Yet the wild note still held in the air, and Laughton had little difficulty in guiding his course by the sound.

The Long Wood covered an extensive ridge to the east of the village. It consisted almost entirely of beeches, magnificent wide-spreading old trees interlocking their branches overhead, so that little of the sky could be seen; but beneath, after the common nature of beech-woods, scarce any undergrowth had gained a footing. Entering by the path that ran along at the foot of the ridge, it was possible to get a fairly uninterrupted view between the lichened trunks: towards the right hand, over level

ground, where presently the wood ceased, giving place to open arable; and towards the left, up the steep hillside, where the great trees mounted shoulder to shoulder until their last ranks towered against the uppermost blue.

Coming out of the hot dazzling sunlight of the meadow into the shady aisles of the wood, was like taking a plunge deep into cool green waters.

High overhead a few stray beams of sunshine penetrated the leafy roof, and sent spangles of pale light dancing across the crowding stems below. There was a far-away twittering song of birds, and now and then the sudden clatter of a pigeon's wings. But the pervading spirit of the place was one of twilight and silence. It seemed to stand apart from the rest of the world, feeling only the side-eddies of that great glad current of life that was overflowing all outer things; as in the antechamber of an opera-house where, of all the colour and stir and clamour of the piece, one gets only a glint, the swell of a chorus, the sob of the violins.

On gaining the woods, Laughton hurried along the path, looking eagerly around him as he went. Of the clanging music from Elisabel's pan and key, he could detect nothing now. Either the swarm had passed right over the wood, and she was pursuing them out of hearing beyond the ridge; or it had settled, and the ringing was no longer needful. This doubt, however, was soon laid to rest. A few minutes brought him to a turn in the path; and there, midway up the precipitous slope, he saw a dark figure standing under one of the trees.

It was Elisabel. She had thrown down skep and copper skimming-pan, and stood gazing up almost vertically into the maze of branches above her. So intent was she on her object, that she did not mark Claud's step over the soft brown carpet of fallen beechmast everywhere covering the ground, until he had all but gained

her side. And then she wheeled round with a startled look that changed at once to a smile of welcome.

"Is it a swarm, bee-mistress? I thought you would be busy on such a morning."

She was still hot, and breathing a little from her long chase. Evidently the bees had given her but brief notice of their intended escapade, for she was dressed much as he had first beheld her on that memorable day which had seen the beginning of their friendship. She had had time only to draw on an old jacket over the scanty raiment dictated by the tropic exigencies of the wash-house; and she stood before him now, the collar of the jacket open, her white breast still heaving within from the exertion she had undergone. Elisabel stamped her foot in laughing vexation.

"Just look!" cried she. "After the long dance they have led me! And there they are, settled a'most at the top of the tree, where 'tis too high to get them! Oh, dear! an' I never give over ringing all the while!"

It was pure Whinbury talk, Marshminster being forgotten in the excitement of the moment; and Claud had grown to love the sound of it well. He took a calm survey of the truant company. The swarm had pitched high up in the labyrinth of the great beech-tree, well out on one of its longest and stoutest boughs. With his eye he carefully estimated the strength of the branch at that point, and its degree of accessibility to a bold climber. And then he began to divest himself of coat and hat. The laugh fled from the girl's face.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him, with a sudden anxiety that pleased him more than anything else had ever done.

He answered her with a straight, masterful look in her eyes.

"I am going up to get your swarm for you. Oh! I

have taken them in worse places than that, never fear!"

He slung the skep over his shoulder, tucked the covering-cloth about his waist, and, with one mighty spring, gained hold of the nethermost of the pendant branches. Thence, after raising himself straddlewise on the bough, he was able to get a grip on the one immediately above, and thus reached the main fork of the tree. The rest was comparatively easy, and he was soon sitting astride of the branch from which the swarm depended some ten or twelve feet away.

But now began the most delicate, most difficult part of the work. He had to creep along the mossy bough, clinging all the way with arms and feet, yet accomplish this so gingerly as not to shake off, or in any way alarm, the bees. Straining her eyes upwards, Elisabel watched him progress inch by inch, until, with infinite care, he managed to get within an arm's stretch of the swarm. The final manœuvre was carried through with what seemed to her amazing speed, dash, and skill. Taking a firm clasp of the bough with his legs, he had then both hands free. Elisabel heard a sudden angry roar far above her. The next moment the swarm was in the skep, safely covered over by the cloth. This astonishing man was sitting up on the branch, with a few hundred stray bees shrilling vindictively about his ears, the while he calmly tied the hive to a string. His voice came drifting down to her through the dim green light of the woodland, with all the quiet deliberateness of one merely engaged in fireside chat.

"I am going to lower them down to you," he called. "Just stand the skep at the foot of the tree, and wait till I come."

Slowly the yellow, dome-shaped hive descended, simmering like a pot as it came, until at last she had it in her

arms. Before she had well completed his directions for its disposal, he had dropped lightly by her side, and was feeling in his coat-pocket for the inevitable tobacco-pipe.

"Now we will give them their liberty," he said. "But we must watch a little to see that they have taken to their hive. So come and sit on that bank of moss over there, and tell me all that has happened lately among Whinbury Beeves."

The hive had been set under a cleft in the green bole of the tree, its constraining cloth removed, and its edge propped up with a stone. At once the bees had crowded out, some to rise frantically on the wing, others to spread themselves black over the skep and the surrounding earth. But in a little while all settled down to a realisation of their new circumstances. The crawling multitude returned to the cool darkness of the hive. Of the bees flying, some gathered round in a joyful singing company; others ranged themselves in open order by the entrance, fanning vigorously with their wings; many were already lancing straight away in all directions through the shady cloisters of the wood in search of provender for the new home. The tits and wood-wrens still kept up their twittering melody far overhead. Pigeons broke the gold-green forest-roof with their clattering wings. Woodpeckers filled the distant glades with scornful laughter. But these common sounds of the woodland counted as nothing for the moment. Ten thousand reckless prodigals had found a home again, and were voicing their gratitude in a chorus that stilled all other notes of life.

For some time Claud and Elisabel sat on the bank, mutely watching this spectacle, and listening to the glad, sweet song that was uplifted around them. Neither would own it to the other, but each was tired from the strenuous

business of the morning; and well content, if for no other reason, to rest a little there in the cool quiet of the wood. Elisabel, still excited over her adventure, sat erect, her great eyes fixed on the hive, her red lips parted in a smile that every now and then crested and broke into bubbling merriment. Claud lay easily by her side, his head propped up on his hand, his glance leaving the bees every moment or two, to dwell on Elisabel's face with a kind of serious exultation.

For weeks he had longed for an opportunity such as this, and here it was, as good and better than he had ever dreamed. In what he had then and there resolved to say to her, he was no love-sick boy, daring to hope that from the mountain of passion that upbore him, might issue no worse than a mouse-like confusion of timorous, disjointed words. He was a grown man, old—too old, perhaps—in many ways of the world. But, at least, he had no doubt of himself. He knew all that was good and pure in his nature went out to this girl of humblest village-birth, this true wild-flower of the hills. He knew that of late he had become a changed man, a saved man, cleansed in heart and mind; and it was all her doing. He could think of no future now that could hold happiness for him without her. That was enough, and more than enough. Very gently he put forth a hand, and laid it upon hers.

"Elisabel!"

If he had yielded to the impulse that beset him then, and had poured out all his heart to her in thronging, burning words of love, he could not have told her more than she gathered from that one utterance of her name; and well he knew it. She started—flushed—in the moment that she left it there, he felt the hand beneath his own grow deathly cold. But swiftly she had withdrawn it, carried it midway to her bosom, and was look-

ing at him with intense inquiry, doubt, and trepidation in her deep blue eyes.

"Yes?" she said breathlessly. And as the word escaped her, she slowly rose to her knees, to her feet; that intense questioning, doubting look riveted upon his face the while.

"I have never called you by your name before. I have never dared. I want you to give me the right. I want it above all things in the world—Elisabel!"

He, too, was on his feet now; and, for all her stalwart height, he looked easily down upon her.

"Have you not seen? Have you not guessed? Oh, my dear, my dear! For long weeks past I have been living on tip-toe—at heart-stretch—never a waking moment night or day but you have filled it. And now, what are you going to do with me? See! here is the little cross you gave—I took, from you! It and I—look what bosom friends we have been!—and here it has nestled ever since, waiting for—for to-day. But now—now I offer it back to you. Will you reclaim it? Or will you give it to me, once for all, and all else with it, for ever?"

Claud had misjudged himself. He had prepared no words for this. What he had said had sprung straight to his lips unconsidered, and he was scarce conscious that the thoughts which had so long held him, had at last found vent in speech. But now he was done. A thousand things he had planned to say to her fled across his mind, yet not a syllable more came to match them. He could only look at her, and draw near, and wonder if she had heard him for the wild knocking of the heart in his breast.

Frankly, he could not tell. She stood quite motionless. She had not moved when he came closer. Only she had turned her face aside, was gazing silently away through the dim arches of the wood, one white hand

trembling at her cheek. At last she spoke, yet so faintly that it seemed but another kind of silence.

"But how—how can it be? You are a—a gentleman. And I——"

It was the one word he loathed above all others, and to hear it from her, stung him into speech as nothing else could have done.

"Not that, Elisabel! Do not say that of me! All that lies far back in my forgotten life, discarded for ever. Say that I am a man—just a man who loves you very dearly, and can think of no greater happiness than to be always near you; to watch over you, and cherish you; and some day, perhaps, become a little worthy——"

"Worthy!"

She had caught him up with a sort of sobbing surprise. She was looking at him now through tears, and he knew they were tears of joy. In a moment his arms were round her with a grip that drove the breath sighingly from her, to mingle with his own.

"Oh, my wild-flower! My queen-bee! Now I will keep the little cross for ever! Now you shall be ruler over all the hives in Whinbury! And these—I will build them a palace of rosewood, with doors of ivory and gold; and they shall never have their honey taken from them. And Blossom—bless her!—she shall do no more work, but lie in a clover-field, with a silver-mounted collar, and—— Yes, laugh, Elisabel! Your laughter—how dearly I love it! You shall laugh all day long in the happy life that is now coming for us. The old Bee-Barn shall ring with it. Ah! but when? When? You shall be laughing there, as mistress of it all, before this swarming-time is done!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHURCH-BAWLING

THERE were few bell-ringers in the whole South Down country who could put so much expression into their business as Peavey, the clerk and sexton of Whinbury church.

Inconspicuous himself, where he stood at the rope in the shadowed corner just inside the west door, the effect of his art made itself felt to the remotest boundary of the parish. On week-days, Peavey contented himself with half a dozen quiet notes, deeming these sufficient summons for the two Miss Welbys and the Rectory housekeeper, who, between them, made up the usual week-day congregation. But on Sundays, and especially Sunday mornings, Peavey let himself go. There was only one bell behind the crazy jalousies of the church-tower, but the old clerk made it speak as if it were a dozen. Soft entreaty, imperious command, grave warning of imminent hell-fire for those who were meditating truantries, mellow-toned approval of faithful footsteps early echoing on the litten-path, now and then a little personal pride at his own performance melodiously expressed—Peavey could put all these things, turn and turn about, into his bell-ringing, and never move a muscle of his solemn face.

But it was in the last five minutes before the commencement of the service, that Peavey's genius for campanology

most finely interpreted itself. Up to that time the dim little church would be almost empty, save for the bevy of whispering school-mites in the transept, and a few of the more decrepit folk who invariably allowed themselves the best part of an hour to get from the other side of the green. But now Peavey struck up a brisk staccato measure, and a change came over the spirit of things.

The footsteps on the church-path outside, lost their dawdling, desultory quality. People lounging towards the church by all approaches, quickened their pace. The building began rapidly to fill. Within the last minute or so, Peavey resorted to a device which never failed in its object. Every now and again he missed a beat, as though the ringing had come to an end; and then each momentary stoppage set up a veritable stampede among the belated ones far and near. Generally, before Mr. Jenyns appeared in the porch, to marshal the choir for their procession to the chancel, all the laity were duly in their places, and Peavey's first responsibility at an end.

It was a Sunday morning, well on in May, and as beautiful a morning as even an English May could provide. The church was full of gay spring toilets. Mrs. Petherway wore her annual new bonnet, fresh from the most stylish shop in Stavisham. Farmer Petherway had donned a duck-green drill waistcoat and trousers of shepherd's plaid. Rose sat by his side wreathed about in chiffons and feather trimmings, all snow-white but for a sweeping plume to her hat of her favourite blue. Turn the eye wherever one would, it was caught by some new ebullition of finery indicative of the season. Even little Miss Brent, busy at the harmonium amidst the choristers in the chancel, had enlivened her old, starched-up cambric gown with ribbons of undeniable newness and festive hue.

But though, in Whinbury church, the attire of the

worshippers reflected the gaiety and glamour of the season, their conduct and demeanour was ever the same. At all times the little church was the quietest place in the world. Save when the rich, burring country voices made the rafters vibrate in the old roof, you could have heard a pin drop at any part of the service. To turn a head, or to scuffle, or to nudge one's friend, was accounted the height of indecorum. Lozenges were rigorously taboo; and on those rare occasions when a marble or a halfpenny escaped from a trouser-pocket and went rollicking down the flags of the aisle, it produced the same effect as a coach and four might have done going through at a gallop.

It was Peavey's lynx eye, and ever-ready cough of admonition, that were mainly responsible for all this; but there was another influence at work nearly as potent. Something in the sound of Mr. Jenyns' voice made inevitably for placidity and rest. He did not drone or drowse. He went steadily on with his task, whether from faldstool or lectern, with the same even, serene tenor note—a sort of overflow from a soul brimming with quietude, that made quiet souls all about him.

And yet he it was who, on this fine Sabbath morning—in the midst of this dim cosy little place filled with its flower-garden of blooming millinery—deliberately let fall a bomb-shell that in a moment had blown all the Whinbury Sunday spirit, its decorum, its snug and solemn apathy, away into the farthermost skies.

He had just finished the second lesson, and had turned from the lectern. But instead of proceeding direct to the sanctuary as usual, he stepped back to his reading-desk, and took up a thin, shabby old book.

The quietude in the little church then was at its supremest. The west door stood open, and there drifted in a glad sound of bird-song, and joyous rustle of warm western air at play amidst green leaves. But this only

made the quietistic spirit within the building more profound. Mr. Jenyns cleared his throat, and launched his projectile :

"I publish the banns of marriage between Claud Laughton and Elisabel Mary March, both of this parish. If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is the first time of asking."

For the space of ten seconds, perhaps, the silence held. And then a deep, sibilant note—caused by everyone first holding his or her breath in blank amazement, and then breathing hard—spread from end to end of the building. Miss Dittemia Welby dropped her prayer-book with a loud report. Mrs. Petherway's hands fell into her lap with almost a like percussion. The old farmer stifled something, that was either an oath or a shout, in the depths of his white Sunday handkerchief. Heads went together everywhere, and Lucy Brent played a woefully false note, for the first time in the common memory. One person alone in all the congregation remained apparently unmoved, and she sat mute and white and still as a stone, save for a tremor in the blue ostrich plume that floated high above all neighbouring feathers.

Punctually to the stroke of half-past twelve, the landlady of the "Five Shearers" inn unbarred her door, and let in an unusually taciturn after-service company.

Each man stepped to his accustomed seat in the bar-parlour, mutely spread out his legs, received his wonted mug of ale from Mrs. Lorrie as though he had forgotten what to do with it. For full five minutes they sat thus, exchanging meaning nods and glances of wonderment, until Mrs. Lorrie, suddenly overcome by the tense atmosphere, broke the spell with a laugh. She had been

to church with the rest, and had long ago made up her mind on this matter.

"Well, 'tis no affair o' ourn," said she tartly. "Nobbut wan i' th' parish 'ull ha' call to grizzle ower things. An' he, poor man—— But there! Gorramighty Hisself caan't help a poor looney as wilfully lets slip his chances!"

"What I be thinkin'," observed Joe Fladgate, scratching perplexedly in his sandy beard. "What I be thinkin' be this here. George Lindup—'tis weeks now sin' 'a went off rindin', an' 'a be long leagues away ower i' th' Wild. Belike 'a'll ne'er come to hear on't till 'a wins back hoame along. An' then—who'll tell 'un?"

"Ah! who i'deed!" The words were echoed round the room until they were taken up by a deep bass voice in the chimney-corner.

"Who'll tell un? Who be to tell young George o' little 'Lisbel March's wooin'?" The choleric eyes of Amos Dawes fell on each face in turn. "Why! th' gell herself, surelye: if 'a arn't a'ready done it. 'Lisbel, she bean't no wanton chit, to play faast an' loose wi' folk. Straight an' true, 'a be: I tell 'ee! An' if she ha' ta'en up along o' wan as we ha' never reckoned with, depend on't, neighbours, George Lindup, 'a ne'er had no chaance, an' no right to complain now. Here's to th' brave pair on 'em, says I—a real good gentleman, an' a lass as desarves to be a leddy!"

"An', Lor'! Amos," said Mrs. Lorrie reflectively, "stranger things ha' come about i' Whinbury, an' like as not we'll live to see stranger yet. Come to think o't, 'tis not so fur out o' the way. Two o' a trade, they be; for all Maast' Laughton has sech queer notions o' things. An' if May doan't mind matin' wi'—well, 'tis no more'n September, that be nobody else's business but her own. Th' trouble be as pore George Lindup, 'a be more o' a bachelor now than ever."

Lucy Brent and her brother took the longest way home from church they could devise. But they had hardly reached the first stretch of solitary lane beyond the village, when he shook her hand from his arm. The two stopped and faced each other breathlessly.

"Good Heavens! Lucy dear! How could you possibly have made such a mistake!"

"I made no mistake, Stephen. It was not possible to misunderstand him. Some amazing thing has happened meanwhile to—to change his purpose, and—— Oh! my dear, dear brother! how can you think I would have risked giving you so—so much pain unless I had been positively certain that—that it was necessary to warn you?"

They stood for a moment regarding each other in the same breathless way as before, each reading the other's eyes.

He looked a typical sailor—Stephen Brent, home now on a long furlough, to try if the bracing purity of Whinbury air could drive the last traces of malaria from his bones. Standing now in the full May sunshine, he displayed little of the invalid, however. Big and burly, with a fine, clean-shaven, ruddy face, and a splendidly-poised head covered with crisp black curls, Stephen looked as sea-worthy as ever Lucy remembered him, save for an almost imperceptible tinge of guinea-gold about the eyes.

Presently he drew her hand within his arm again, and they resumed their walk.

"But Rose," he burst out, in a little while. "You spoke of her just as positively, Lucy. Surely you made a mistake there? She seems exactly the same—just as light-hearted, and careless, and as—as go-ahead as ever. And did you look at her when the banns were being read? I did, Lucy; and I could swear it all meant nothing to her. How can you get over that?"

Lucy pondered this, and the more she did so, the better she liked it.

"Stephen, no, indeed. There I cannot be so sure. I see her so seldom, and speak with her more rarely still. Oh! it is quite possible I may have been wholly wrong on that side."

Involuntarily she added something more that was all but lost to him. He pressed her hand.

"Thank you, dear! I half guessed, half heard, what you said. Well: I am only human, and if I, too, hope earnestly——" He stopped with a sudden remembrance, a flush of shame. He put his arm about her. "Forgive me, my dearest sister: forgive me for forgetting—for being such a selfish brute. Oh! what you must have suffered, dear! And he—he came to you! You, of all people!"

"Hush, dear! That is all over and buried now. I shall be quite happy if he can be happy. And I know he never guessed."

The Sunday dinner-table talk at Whinbury farm-house, though Rose made several determined attempts to divert it into ordinary channels, returned at every pause to the one all-absorbing item of local news. The great round of beef was gone from the board, pudding was disposed of, cheese dismissed, walnuts were cracking, and the old port glowing tawny-red in all the glasses; and still Mrs. Petherway found something more to say on the matter.

"I do assure you, you could have knocked me down with a feather!" she cried, for about the twentieth time. "Never the slightest idea o' such a thing, I didn't ha'; and I am sure no one else——"

"Well, well!" interrupted the old farmer, rather testily. "'Tis no great matter arter all, Martha. The

world 'ull go on pretty much the same, I reckon; so now leave it be, my dear. Tom, Tom, you young rascal! There's Mr. Roper wi' nought in his glass! He'll think we ha' forgotten our manners, wi' all this palaver ower a common church-bawlin'."

Roper, who had ridden over to Whinbury that morning from Stavisham—an excursion for which lately he had never failed in a pretext—had been silently listening to the talk, and studying the reflection of his finger-tips in the dark mirror of the table. But he looked up now at sound of his name. He flashed a smile of glittering white and gold at the old farmer.

"Indeed, Mr. Petherway, your son has been far too persistent already in his attentions. Not another drop, I thank you. But forgive me if I revert to this exceedingly funny business again. You see, I am still somewhat of a stranger here, and not quite *au fait* with local matters. This Mr. Laughton who is to wed the village beauty—did I not hear a curious word linked with his name? Mystery-Laughton, I believe you called him, my dear Tom. Now, what does that mean, may I presume to ask?"

"Oh yes, sir!" cried Mrs. Petherway, delighted at this unlooked-for resurrection of the subject that so swayed her. "'Tis a nickname the folk give him hereabouts. I don't rightly know how 'a came by it, but——"

Rose bent and whispered to her.

"Mother, is this necessary? I am sure we have all heard quite enough of this—this person's affairs. The—the servants are listening."

As she turned to the table again she knew that Roper's haggard black eyes were fixed upon her, and that he had partly overheard her speech. Mrs. Petherway's loud whisper in reply could hardly have escaped any.

"Oh! very well, Rose dear! I am sure I clean forgot. Naturally you don't care to——"

A rattle of laughter from Tom cut off the rest. He was rocking in his seat hilariously with a mischievous eye on Rose.

"I'll tell you, old chap! I know all about it. Claud Laughton Esquire, alias Gentleman-Mystery-Laughton; age well on towards forty—born Heaven only knows where—suddenly appeared in Whinbury about ten years ago—don't know where he came from, probably out of the skies, for he has never told a soul who he is, nor anything about his affairs. For all anyone knows, he may be an escaped convict or a ticket-of-leave man; and his real name Bill Muggins or Jack Sykes. Never any letters, nor friends coming, nor any connections outside. Just a Mystery, and that's all. Pass the port!"

Throughout this recital, Rose had directed upon her brother an icy stare of indifference.

"I don't know, Tom," she said quietly, on its conclusion, "what possible interest you may imagine all this can have for anyone here. I——"

"Oh, ho! oh, ho!" cried Tom. "Just listen to her! Did you ever hear the story of the Sour Grapes, Rosie darling?"

At that the gold-fringed lids opened wide—the grey eyes awoke. Rose looked round her. The two maids were loitering at the sideboard, ostensibly busy with the silver. Rose raised her voice.

"Tom is wholly mistaken," she said, "as everyone else here but himself very well knows. Of course, in one way, this affair is a little unpleasant for me, because I believe my name has been associated with Mr. Laughton's by certain gossips in the village; and, once started, it is very difficult to stop a story of that kind, however false. People are likely to say now, I suppose, that I have been

thrown over for this village-girl. Well: I can't help what they say, and don't care. All I do know is that there is not a shadow of truth in the story."

They were all silent, looking at her. Tom shuffled his feet uneasily. Rose caught her breath, then gave vent to a long, low silvery laugh.

"What impertinence it all is!" she cried. "I admit, of course, that I may have been a little—a little unbending at times. But there was absolutely nothing between us, nor ever could be. He amused my dull existence—that was all. I had naturally far more regard for my family than ever to consider an alliance with a 'mystery.'"

She faltered. Her grey eyes made a sudden search-light sweep round the ring of faces, then fell. Mrs. Petherway rose to her feet. In the confusion that followed, on the breaking up of the company, Rose escaped to the garden alone.

She was still walking there when, half an hour later, Roper left three people comfortably snoring in the drawing-room, and sauntered out upon the lawn.

Rose was in the lilac-walk at the far end, invisible to him for the moment. Roper looked about him. On the path hard by was a curious litter, and he smiled sardonically as he espied it. Blossoms had been stripped from the bushes right and left, torn to pieces by ruthless hands, cast down, and trodden underfoot—roses, and lilies, and purple iris, all had been mangled thus. The scattered petals lay in a trail before him. He nodded his head slowly, smiled to himself again, then set off to track the destroyer down.

"Miss Petherway," he said, as he came up with her, "I have been thinking over your little village-romance here, and I am not sure you are all doing quite the right thing about it. As the principal people living in the place, you know, you have a kind of public duty, a sort

of guardianship over the conduct of those who are socially inferior to you, don't you think?"

He had attached himself to her side. He kept his glassy smile turned full on her while they walked. Rose looked straight ahead.

"Well; possibly," she returned, as he paused. "And what of it?"

"Oh, nothing much!" he said carelessly. "Only it occurred to me that I might be of some small service to your people in the matter. You will of course wonder what business it can be of mine. But, believe me, I am very much attached to you all—*all*;"—he emphasised the word, bending slightly towards her—"and it would be an honour and a pleasure if I might be permitted to look upon your responsibilities, in a sense, as my own."

Rose turned a lazy scornful look upon him.

"Really, Mr. Roper, you have the better of me. What is it you mean? How can you, or anyone else, possibly interfere in the matter?"

"Not interfere—oh, no!" he returned, hesitantly. "I did not mean that. All I thought was that, on general principles, it is hardly right for a respectable community to allow unknown people to shelter themselves in its midst without making due inquiry as to their worthiness. Why! this person, for all you know, may be a notorious swindler and a refugee from the law!"

And then she began to get a first faint drift of his meaning. She pulled up short, and faced him silently, her cheeks aflame, her grey eyes glowing through their narrow curtained slits like a beautiful cat's.

"I am leaving this part of the country to-morrow," Roper went on, "and must remain in London for some time. Now, there are certain people I know there, whose business it is to solve mysteries, trace antecedents, and the like—— Ah! I see you understand me now!"

"Why in London?"

She rasped out the question suddenly. A curious cast spread over his cadaverous face. He stammered his reply.

"Oh, well—you see, I—— The truth is, Miss Petherway—by an amazing coincidence, I believe—indeed, I am sure—that this person and I are not wholly strangers to each other. Don't know where I have seen him. But certain have met him before, and under circumstances not wholly to his advantage. To be quite frank with you, Miss Petherway, I deeply suspect him; and conceive it to be my duty to expose him, if it turns out that he deserves exposure, so as to put it out of his power to work any more mischief, either here or elsewhere."

As he spoke, he kept his bloodshot, sunken eyes upon her, watching for a sign. And now it came unmistakably. He turned away to hide an irrepressible grin of delight.

"I did not wish to trouble your parents with this," he continued, "and still less your loquacious brother. So I had no alternative but to speak of it to you. I know I can count on your discretion, and even secrecy, if need be. For, you know, a man who has been in the army, with the right to call himself a gentleman, does not greatly care for his name to be mixed up in such a business, however necessary it may be for the public good."

He was extracting a cigarette from an elegant silver case. The hand that now clutched his arm all but shook the trinket from his grasp.

"But this will need money, Mr. Roper. It is not fair that you should be put to expense on our account."

"Oh, well, Miss Petherway!" he began deprecatingly.

"Will a hundred pounds—two hundred—cover all likely charges?"

Her vehement tone surprised even him.

"Oh, most certainly! It would enable additional means to be employed that——"

"Very well, then, Mr. Roper. I will give you the money. I will go back to the house and write a cheque immediately. But remember!—there is no time to lose. This marriage must be stopped. We must save this poor silly girl from her folly at any cost. And we have only a fortnight to do it in! Oh! can you not make your journey to London to-day?—can you not leave at once?"

Within ten minutes Roper was in the saddle, and off at a gallop. But once out of view of the white figure watching him from the stable-gate, he pulled his steed up to an easy walk. He drew a slip of pink paper from his pocket and feasted greedy eyes upon it.

"Two hundred!" The words escaped his thin lips in a gasp of incredulous joy. "Two hundred golden sovereigns, and"—he dived a hand into his breeches pocket, bringing up a few meagre coins—"and I was almost on the rocks! Jehu! what a bit of luck!"

He put the cheque carefully away again, and went forward gaily whistling. The whistle, however, changed the next moment into a laugh.

"Stop the marriage! Ha, ha, ha! I am afraid I can't agree with her on the necessity. Oh, dear no! That might suit Miss Mangel-Wurzel Money-Bags, but it won't suit a gentleman of the name of—well: Courtenay Roper is near enough. No, no! We'll get this hulking honey-merchant safely yoked up to his Betty, and then we'll see what else can be done."

CHAPTER XV

THE RINDERS

THE plash of oars, sounding from the river at the foot of the garden—a sound which a few weeks ago Elisabel would have allowed to pass almost unnoticed—brought her to the water's edge at top speed. Shading her eyes from the glittering morning sun, she could not help a throb of disappointment. It was only Nellie Brimble, the maid from the farm. Nellie did not see Elisabel. Pulling lustily at her oars, her glossy chestnut curls bobbing to and fro in the sunshine, she would have passed by on the swift up-tide with the little mahogany shell of a pleasure-boat in which she was embarked, had not Elisabel hailed her.

"Where be goin', Nell, so early?—in such a fine ship, an' all in your new gown, too!"

Nellie Brimble rested on her oars. She smoothed down the folds of her pink cotton dress pridefully. A sunbonnet of the same colour and material lay on the thwart by her side. Nellie shook the curls away from her round, childlike face as she answered her old school-fellow:

"North Woods by Ambledown, 'Lisbel. 'Tis a letter as Miss Rose warnts carried to George Lindup, as is gone rindin' out there somewheres, an' I be to gie it into's own hand. Miss Rose, she ha' lent me her noo row-boat a' purpose. Bean't ut fine, 'Lisbel! 'Tis jest as good

as a 'ollerday! Why! I han't seen a rindin'-camp, no, not fer years an' years!"

Elisabel had grown grave and thoughtful.

"Just pull in 'longside o' th' bank, Nellie, will ye?" she called to the girl, after a moment's hesitation, "an' bide a second whiles——"

She did not wait to finish her sentence, but raced off up the garden, reappearing in a few minutes with a packet in her hand.

"'Tis summat o' George's," she explained, in response to Nellie's wondering look, "summat 'a left here, an' I promised I'd send to 'un. There be some writin' inside, an' George, he'll unnerstand."

Nellie fell to pinching the packet all ways, devoured by curiosity. "'Tis summat hard, 'Lisbel, an' big an' round," she said. "Couldn't ye jest let me ha' one peep?" But suddenly abashed on a view of Elisabel's reproachful face, she thrust the packet into her pocket. "I'll gi'e it to 'un, 'Lisbel dear! I knaws! Lorsh! 'a wur th' first one I thought on yesterday, soon as I heerd th' church-bawlin'!"

She fitted the dainty sculls into their silver-plated rowlocks, settled herself on the crimson velvet cushion, and sent the little jaunty, expensive toy of a boat flashing out again into mid-stream.

There were few more pleasant things to be done of a fine May morning than to get afloat on Whinbourne river, and speed up with the tide. It was at once immobility and progress. The glassy breadth of water travelled on between its banks, the mirror of its surface unbroken save for the idle, rhythmic dip of the oars, and the touch of a swallow's wing as now and again one of the gambolling company described too close a circle. In the green reed-thicket that lined the banks, sedge-warblers sang fretfully—the faint breeze rustled—there was a tremulous

music below where the water played through the myriad stems like a hand over a harp. Sometimes a kingfisher, darting across stream, drew a streak of emerald fire from cover to cover. Herons rose and flapped lazily away over the meadow. High up in the blue, there was such a medley of lark-song, that one might have thought every sunbeam and every green leaf had its own allotted minstrel in the skies.

Nellie Brimble kept the boat in the centre of the river, her oars vexing the glassy surface of the waters scarce more than the swallow's wings. Soon the low-lying willow-woods were left behind her, and she was wafted among the hills. Here the great elms and oaks made a canyon of green shadow, through which the river wound silent and swift as ever. Here and there came a break of open country, where the hawthorns crowded to the water's brink to gaze at their snow-white beauty mirrored below. Solemn cattle stood knee-deep in buttercups and purple lady's-smock, eyeing the little skiff uncuriously. Every moment, from the blowing thistles on the uplands, a myriad downy flecks were borne across by the gentle air, many to sow themselves uselessly on the tide.

Nellie spun this part of her journey out to its fullest. Sometimes she laid by her oars entirely, and sat with her plump hand over the side, letting the water ripple through her fingers, while the little craft floated onward, as though submerged nereids had it in tow. Once she pulled into a creek overshadowed by hawthorns, and plucked herself a nosegay to fasten under the silver brooch that held her muslin neckerchief about her shoulders. And once she abandoned the boat altogether for a time near an old disused chalk-quarry, and spent half an hour listening to the nightingales, for which this shy green nook was famed. But at length the wide, afforested valley known as the North Woods, drew into sight round a bend

of the stream. Nellie Brimble found the landing-place used by the woodlanders, and making sure that both her missives were safe where she had stowed them, set off in search of the rinders' camp.

It was no easy task, even for one born and bred in the country. On all sides the oak-woods stretched away over hill and dale, open where the undergrowth had been cleared in the foregoing winter, but forming an all but impenetrable jungle elsewhere. Numberless tiny tracks led off in all directions, crossing and recrossing each other as though designed to baffle anyone seeking a way through. And every new vista that discovered itself to the wanderer was exactly like all the others—either it presented a vast unbroken sea of bluebells with the great oaks just touching finger-tips over them, their shadows making patches of deeper blue on the sunlit azure; or there broke out narrow clefts in the hazel-copse, where one saw but the bluebell light below, and above a streak of the summer heaven held up by towering walls of green.

Through this wilderness, in sunlight or in shadow, but always over the same floor of living azure, Nellie Brimble chose her way, stopping every minute or so to listen.

For a long time her ears detected nothing but the common woodland sounds—the singing of the birds, the scurry of rabbits, the shrill discordance of magpie and jay. But she guided herself unerringly by the felled trees that lay here and there in her view—great oaks thrown to earth and stripped of their bark, so that they looked like white ghosts lifting skeleton arms, floundering and drowning in the bluebell sea. There was something eerie in the spectacle, and Nellie did not venture too near these fallen leviathans; but turned and sped on towards where she saw afar off the next pale gleam under the spreading green.

At length the note for which she had been listening, reached her straining ear. A soft, thudding sound, measured and slow, came up to her from the depths of a valley that might have been filled with molten ultramarine. There was no mistaking it. It was the note of the great felling-axe, wielded, as Nellie rightly guessed, by Long Ben, the grizzled old chief of the rinders. She heard it cease after a while, then stood on tip-toe, waiting for what she knew would follow. There was an interval of silence, a sharp crack, a sweeping, grinding sound as the top of the doomed tree tore itself from the age-long embrace of its fellows, and then a mighty booming note as the vast trunk crashed to the ground.

Distant as it was from where she stood, Nellie felt the solid earth shudder beneath her feet. A flock of birds went over her head, twittering fearsomely. And then she heard voices and laughter, one voice she knew well above the rest. Speeding down the slope, she soon came into view of the rinders. Half a dozen of them were already swarming over the recumbent tree, and the long slivers of bark were flying in all directions. But the glint of her pink dress through the undergrowth had already been descried. A tall figure detached itself from the rest, and came striding over the bluebells to meet her.

"What! Nellie! Be ut really you, Nell?"

George Lindup had pulled up short when still a dozen paces off. The friendliness in his glance, on recognising her, was plain enough, but so was another thing.

"I—I am sorry you be disappointed, George." Nellie scanned his sunburnt face apprehensively. He came slowly towards her.

"Why, 'tis trew, Nell," he confessed, "as I didn't look fer yerself pertickler. When I see th' shimper o' your gown, I thought belike as 'twur summun else——" He stopped, with a sudden questioning look in his deep-set

eyes of blue. "Nauthin' wrong at hoame, be there, Nell?" he asked anxiously.

A fine figure he made, standing there in his rough woodman's clothes, leaning on his stripping-iron, with the sawdust powdering his bronzed skin and curly hair. Nellie gazed up at him in growing concern as she fumbled in her pocket. Which should she give him first? she asked herself desperately. Her heart quailed before the dilemma, nor would her hand make the choice: it brought out letter and packet together.

"George!" she said confusedly, pressing both into his hand, "There be wan from Miss Rose, an' wan from —from 'Lisbel. Oh! I be so sorry for ye, George! I—I——"

A curious change had come over him. The stripping-iron had fallen to the ground. He stood for a moment stock-still, gazing at what she had given him "Bide a minnut, here, Nell, will ye?" he said presently, in so low a tone that she could scarce hear the words. And then he walked a few paces off, and stood again for a while turning letter and packet over and over between trembling hands. At length, watching him anxiously, Nellie saw him tear first at the wrappings of the packet, and then at the dainty sky-blue envelope. Some glittering object was thrust into his breast. He looked towards her, holding up a paper in each hand.

"Nell!"

She was at his side in a moment.

"There be writin' here. I aan't much o' a schollard, Nell. If ye'd be kind enough to read what they says, Nell, I'd be—— This here wan first, Nell—quick, do ye mind?"

It was a half-sheet torn from an old school exercise-book, and bore very few lines. Nellie Brimble pored over it tremulously in the dim woodland light, and while

she read, the laughter and careless talk of the rinders, drifted over to them, mingling with her voice in George's dazed ears.

"I send it back to you"—Elisabel had written—"as you asked me to do. I never wished to take it, George, as you know; and since you went away, something has come to pass in my life which makes it wrong for me to keep it any longer. Dear George, I am so sorry I cannot do what you asked me. Once I had nearly made up my mind to do it just for old friendship's sake, and because you were so lonely. But then the something I have told you of, happened to me, and I saw how cruel it would have been to both of us. Forgive me, dear George, and try to forget, for both our sakes,

"Your affectionate friend,

"ELISABEL."

As George Lindup listened, he had slowly turned his back on Nellie, and now stood staring straight away into the gold-green wilderness with unseeing eyes.

"Now the t'other!" he said hoarsely, as she paused. Nellie unfolded the pale blue sheet, and, for all her sorrow, she could not help giving it a quick, impulsive sniff as its fragrance rose to her.

"DEAR MR. GEORGE LINDUP"—the letter ran, in a large, sprawling hand, with the words all strung together like the tabs on a kite-tail—"I am writing to you now because a thing has taken place here which I know will cause you great pain, and I am anxious that you should learn the real truth from one you can trust, rather than hear a garbled and perhaps false version of it through strangers.

"Believe me, Elisabel March has not behaved towards you with the heartless wickedness it may seem. I judge

it to be only a blind infatuation with her, and I think she will soon come to her real senses again, and bitterly repent throwing you over in the way she has done. This person, who calls himself a gentleman, but who has taken such a mean advantage of your absence, will certainly tire of her before very long; and it is my great hope, and shall ever be my care, to help her through her folly without, if possible, real harm coming of it.

"It is difficult for me to put into words all I feel I ought to say, but I can guess what fearful thought and suspicion will occur to you directly you read this; and it is my duty to give you any grain of comfort possible. Bad as this thing is, we have no reason to fear the worst yet, and if good advice can do anything, the worst shall never happen to her. She is in the midst of friends, more than she ever dreams, perhaps; and, if not for his own reputation's sake, at least in consideration of his bodily safety, he will see the need of behaving towards her generously, in any event.

"One thing I beg you solemnly to promise me, George. It is that you will not let your first anger, on hearing of this cruel affair, lead you into some mad act of violence against him. I cannot, indeed, excuse his conduct in any way. But for Elisabel's sake, as her mind is now, you must do nothing in haste.

"Believe me,

"Yours,

"Rose Petherway."

"What do't all mean, Nell?" cried poor George Lindup, as Nellie finished. "'Im, 'im,' th' woman keeps on a-sayin'! Why doan't she gie th' blackguard his name? But 'a'll ha' to do th' right by th' gell; or here's wan as 'ull warnt to know the reason why, no matter whose son 'a be!"

Nellie started.

"They was arst i' church yesterday, George, all proper-like. An' ut bean't Maast' Tom, George dear. Oh, no! 'tis not so bad as that! Ye'll ha' no call to——"

"Who be ut, then, Nell? Who be ut?"

She shrank under his fierce words and fiercer mien.

"Why, 'tis Maast' Laughton, George! I—I——"

"Maast' Laughton?"

Even as he repeated the name, she saw a transformation come over him. His anger died as the flame of a torch dies when cast into water. The whole man wilted like a ripped balloon. He turned slowly from her.

"Maast' Laughton! An'—an' 'Lisbel Maarch!"

The words faintly drifted back to Nellie, as he passed away from her amidst the crowding trees. On an impulse she followed him. He had sunk down upon a felled trunk in a little shady glen, and had taken his chin into both hands. Quietly she sat herself beside him, and linked her arm with his.

"Doan't ye take on so, George dear!" she said pitifully. "'Lisbel, ut bean't her fault, like. 'Tis allers so wi' gells, George. Year in an' year out they be just maids, an' all men be nought to 'em. An' then one comes along, an', all on a suddent-like, there be none other for 'un i' th' wureld. Hoame, an' th' ould folk, an' all friends—they be clean swep' away; an' nauthin' matters to 'em but the wan man's company. Ah! I arn't lived seventeen long year 'i this wureld wi'out——"

At that, and her sage solemnity, George Lindup could not forbear a smile, in spite of the trouble that was on him.

"Seventeen year, Nellie? Lorsh! ye doan't say so, my dear! All that, be ut, indeed?" He was silent a while. When he spoke again, his voice had fallen curiously quiet and gentle. "I doan't blame 'Lisbel, Nell, mind ye,

—no, not fer a moment. An' Maast' Laughton, what call ha' I to blame him? 'Tis the best man as has won. A trew man, 'a be, none better: a man as any woman might be proud o'; a man as 'ull do th' right because 'a caan't do no other thing. Na, na, Nell! Lor' aloane knaws what fears o' evil druv into my head when first the news come to me. But now I begin to see ut all different. 'Lisbel, 'tis far better fortun' for her than anything I could bring. Now she'll be a leddy, God bless her! along o' a trew gentleman as loves her. An' as fer me—what more could a plain man wish?"

The voices of the rinders were dim and far off now. But as George Lindup ceased, one lusty note uprose over all others in the wild woodland.

"George! Ahoy there, George!"

"Hullo-o-o-o!" George Lindup's stentorian rejoinder broke out at Nellie's side, nearly cracking the drums of her ears.

"Dinner-time, George! Come along, an' bring yer friend!"

George Lindup scrambled to his feet.

"Ye'll jest take a bite along o' we, Nellie, wunt ye?" he said, as he hurried her along. "'Tis only biled robbut, but 'tis real fine meat. Fegs! th' robbuts i' North Woods, they doan't get no chaance, wi' rindin' folk about."

The camp was not far distant. Nellie saw first a lean blue spiral of smoke rising amidst the trees, and then what looked like a number of square woodstacks arranged in a circle. Getting nearer, however, these objects revealed themselves as roughly improvised sleeping-huts, while the space enclosed by them was now seen to contain a sort of big table, made of hurdles packed neatly together, surrounded by a quadrangle of logs laid lengthwise, which served the rinders for seats.

Ten or twelve men were dotted about this enclosure,

and all were busily engaged on some task or other under the direction of Long Ben, the rinders' chief.

Some were spreading the table with clean sheets of newspaper, and setting out upon it battered tin platters and a wonderful array of odds and ends of knives, forks, and spoons. Others were bearing the great cauldron from the fire, or bringing loaves of bread and foaming pitchers of ale from some secret buttery. Long Ben himself had just finished the construction of a species of throne at one end of the table, which he was covering with a gaily-striped blanket off his own bed; and just as Nellie and George arrived on the scene, a sun-blackened giant in moleskins came striding in with a double armful of blue-bells, which he stuck in a water-bucket in the centre of the board.

"Hur-r-rup!" bawled Long Ben, as he caught sight of Nellie. And at the sound, every man's cap was clawed off his head, and the trembling, smiling, blushing damsel escorted, amidst a respectful silence, to the seat of honour prepared for her.

It was a great time for Nellie, and a red-letter day in the rinding annals of North Woods. While the camp lasted, feminine society was almost as rare a thing in it as in any lumber-settlement of the far western world; and from Long Ben down to the youngest member of the gang, each vied with the rest to make Nellie's visit a pleasurable one. George Lindup, alone of all the party, sat mute and serious on the log by her side, though that did not allay his diligence for her comfort. It served, however, to draw upon him a fire of humorous tongues; and inured as he was to the rough but kindly chaff of woodland folk, it was hardly to be borne under his present trouble.

Yet he received no mercy, and could plead for none. There was Nellie Brimble at his side, a fact inexplicable

at the present juncture. Appearances were dead against him, as he was compelled despairfully to own. George Lindup bowed his curly shock-head to the blast, and devoutly longed for the lighting of pipes and the breaking up of the company.

It came at last, but not without a parting shot from the gaunt, grey-headed, old leader of the gang, who hitherto had contented himself with laughing at the tender innuendoes of his less responsible understrappers. Nellie, rippling over with mirth, triumph, and satisfaction, had been assisted from her throne, had shaken hands with each of the company, and was marching off by George's side to be shown an easier, shorter way to the river, when Long Ben sprang upon the hurdle-stack.

"Up mugs!" he shouted, "an' here's a brimmer, lads, to our ould mate, George Lindup, an' his missus what's to be—Lor' bless 'em!"

In the uproar that followed, George dragged his companion away at top speed, nor paused until they had left the camp far behind them.

"'Tis real awkard fer ye, Nell," he said then, in profoundly apologetic tone, deep commiseration for her in his mournful eyes, "real downright angerin'—'tis. Sech rough, onthinkin' chaps, they be. Well, well: ye mustn't think too hard on 'em, gell. They means nought, my dear, as I knaws full well."

He was reassured to observe no trace of wounded propriety in Nellie's flushed cheeks and dancing eyes, as she tripped along beside him, nor any trace of offence in her tone as she answered him.

"Oh, no, George! Nauthin' at all! 'Tis only their fun! An' what a real happy lot they be! An' all rinders' wives, as I knows, they be allers happy, too."

George took another long look at her. The chestnut curls were bobbing merrily in and out of the pink bonnet;

and the plump, rosy face, whose features were all sections of circles in varying arcs, showed nothing but a child's pure, unthinking elation. George was satisfied. She had surely taken no offence. He could let his mind resume its contemplation of the letters in his pocket, and the problem of how they were to be answered.

On the long walk to the riverside George uttered scarce a word, but strode along deeply cogitating. Even when he had handed Nellie safely into her seat in the little boat, he stood leaning over the rail of the landing-stage, looking down upon her, a monument of pitiful indecision. And then he suddenly straightened himself up.

"Nell!" he said, and at last his voice had something of the old strength and ring in it, "tell 'Lisbel as ye gie me th' packet, an' I unnerstood, an' I said as I wished her nought i' th' wureld but joy an' good luck fer ever. Will ye tell her that, Nell?—all by hersel', mind ye? An' Miss Rose, tell her— Noa, 'twunt do so! Here! take this'n, Nellie!" He handed down to her Rose's letter, and the stump of a lead-pencil. "Write on th' back on't, my dear, will ye? Putt it down jest as I says it, Nell. Jest this here, Nell: ''Lisbel's wishes be my wishes. If 'tis to be so, so let it be. No one warnts nought else but to see 'Lisbel happy, an' if happiness lie that way fer her, 'tis th' ony way as wishes your obedient servant, George Lindup, as thanks ye kindly fer trouble taken.'"

Between every few words he paused, while Nellie's pencil took them hastily down. When she had finished, he bent to her.

"Good-bye, Nell! Th' tide be turned, and 'ull be jest right fer ye: ye'll ha' an easy pull hoame. An' I do hope, Nell, as ye wunt let ut worrit ye—that what they rough chaps said."

Her laugh came back to him as the boat skimmed

away down the ebb. He watched the diminishing spot of pink until it was gone in the hazy glitter of the waters.

"Noa: I do b'lieve as she han't taken no real offence," he comforted himself, as he strode away into the blue-bell gloom.

In the privacy of her boudoir, Rose Petherway read George Lindup's message, and laughed bitterly over it. "Oh! I know you! you fine, self-sacrificing person!" she sobbed, as she held the letter in the candle-flame. "But you are only like a loaded gun, George, that has been put by for a time. I'll find a way to fire you yet!"

CHAPTER XVI

AUFGESCHOBEN IST AUFGEHOBEN

CLAUD LAUGHTON had come up on the hill-top to think. When, half an hour before, he had parted from Elisabel at her garden-gate, had turned for the last of many times to look back upon her, and answer her waved farewell, he had gone up the street wearing the very face of joy. Silently laughing to himself, he had repeated over and over again his last words to her, and dwelt upon the flush, the long, steady look of love and trust out of her great eyes, with which she had mutely answered him.

"Only another week, and then——!"

But abruptly turning from the village into the lane that led towards Whinbury Hill, with every step he had taken up the steep path the face of Claud Laughton had grown graver and graver. And now, lying where he had flung himself down on the soft turf of the hill-top, and gazing at the setting sun, it was no face of joy that he turned towards the glowing western amber, but the knit visage of a care-ridden, thought-worn man.

"Only another week, and then——! Well: and what then?"

The question, which, hitherto, he had hardly dared to think of, much less to ask himself outright, was—would Elisabel March then marry him, after he had told her

the story of his past life, as he deemed himself bound in honour to do?

Turning the whole thing over in his mind—there on the hill-top under the tranquil light of evening, at the end of a long day's work—he was compelled at last despairfully to avow that he knew no certain answer to the question. Frankly, he could not tell how she would view the mere fact of his previous marriage, apart from the sickening tragedy that had brought it to a close.

It was true that he had little more to be ashamed of than a spell of reckless folly, paid for over and over again by the hornet-nest of troubles which it had brought about his ears. If the tale had to be told to a normal, seasoned, reasonable woman of the world, Claud would have been in little doubt of the view she would be likely to take—the view, indeed, which ought to be taken by any sensible daughter of Eve. But, with Elisabel, it might turn out quite differently. Ever since the incident of the little black cross which he had stolen from her, Claud had looked upon her with new and somewhat fearsome eyes. It had given him a glimpse of the inmost Elisabel, a totally different being from that which he had first imagined her. What he had seen then, though it had infinitely charmed, had just as infinitely perturbed him. He had been like a man peering into a sanctuary chanced upon in the midst of a beautiful wild forest—he had seen in her a wholly unexpected, cloister-quiet pureness of heart, a still, yet deep running tide of devotional feeling, on which, as he now realised, the true soul of the girl must float, encompassed yet untouched by the outer, inconsequent, mirth-loving part of her nature.

It was conceivable then, nay, it was even probable, that when he came to speak to Elisabel of these buried things of his past, she might take an extreme, perhaps a wholly quixotic view of his present qualification.

That the fact of a former marriage of his would come to her as a shock, even a painful, though passing disillusionment, he had deemed as certain. So much he had reckoned with: it was only in the nature of things, part of the price he had to pay. But that she might conceive him as somehow bound to the past, morally barriered from farther wedlock, he now most abjectly feared. He had heard of women of that austere, self-immolating stamp, but had never really believed that they humanly existed. Yet here he was, dreading, nay, almost counting upon, the thing that hitherto he had found inconceivable.

And if to tell Elisabel of his former life—he a free man, honoured and honourable, free to give hand and heart whithersoever he pleased—meant running the risk of losing her altogether on such a magnificently foolish plea; well—he could not face the ordeal, and that was plain, sober fact.

Claud Laughton sprang to his feet, and began charging restlessly to and fro. The sun had dipped beneath the earth-line. Nothing remained now of the rich amber light but an array of fine-drawn lines touched on their lower edges with crimson. Beyond these uprose a tranquil veil of luminous green, through which had pricked the first night-star. Claud stopped in his furious march to gaze upon it. The day had been a breezy one, but now there was not breath enough to move a leaf in all the wide prospect below him. Behind lay the waste of the South Downs, an infinite solitude, mute but for a drowsy note now and again from the folded sheep. So still and clear was the air that he could hear the peewits crying over the darkening river a mile away. Claud felt himself hopelessly adrift on a sea of perplexity.

But why not wait—the thought came to him—wait until he had made Elisabel his wife; and then, after

happy days, long happy years perhaps, had proved to her his love and heart-whole constancy, let her glean the story from him little by little, and trust to their pair of souls to find a way, even though then she should hold this view he feared?

It would be violating no conscientious scruple of his own, for he sincerely decried such hair-splitting morality, and could do no less than seek to circumvent it. And yet—Claud looked at the tiny point of quivering silver in the green, at the deepening azure above, at the night lifting out of the waste of hills behind him, and lighting the stars up one by one. Something in the calm, the purity, of the scene smote him to the core of his vexed heart, and gave him a sudden sense of unworthiness.

Had he the right—believing, as he did, that Elisabel's nature might prove of so unearthly a texture—to keep from her this fact of his past until it was too late for her to act according to her principles? For all he knew, she might regard such wilful reticence almost in the light of a betrayal. The thing designed to assure his happiness, might end by shutting the doors of Paradise for ever against him. Claud took his courage and manhood resolutely into both hands. No!—he must risk all, and tell her all. It was the only way. To-morrow evening—when again they were to meet as usual at the end of their long day's work apart—he would tell her plainly all there was to tell. And then, if she took the view he feared, he must trust to his own sense of right, and reasoning powers, to prevail against such over-righteous scruples.

But the morrow came and went. Again he parted from her in the tunnel-like gap of the barberry-hedge. Again he looked back upon her where she stood with the yellow spangles of the fallen blossom littering her dark hair, and again his ardent words had brought the flush into the comely pallor of her cheek, the love-light into her eyes:

"Only six days more, my dear, my dear! And then——!"

And what then? For again he was plodding away through the golden dusk, as far removed from his purpose as ever.

It was not his fault, he muttered to himself dismally. Many times he had tried to bring his lagging tongue to the task, but he had failed: a holy saint could have done no better. Whether wandering together among the hives, or down by the whispering river, or sitting in the little parlour with its geranium-clogged panes, its odour of chintz, its softly-twittering goldfinch, the same forces had arrayed themselves against him.

Of the many times when he had drawn near the brink, once he had thought himself toppling over, safe from all chance of retrogression. And then, in a flash, he had seen where his chief deterrent lay.

They stood together looking up at a portrait of old Caleb March. Around them in the little room was a cool dim light, and almost a silence but for the industrious goldfinch pecking at his stick of plantain in the window. But outside in the garden there was a very hurricane of music from bees and birds, vivid colour, streaming sunshine—all the prodigality of good things heaped upon earth sky-high when June is young. Elisabel's hand tightened on his arm, as they looked at the portrait together.

"I wish," she said slowly, "he, poor faather, could have known you as I have got to know you now. Oh! the hard things I remember——! But you do not blame him, dear? You will not think ill of him for all he thought and said of you? For my sake, Claud, you will forgive and forget?"

It was some time before he could answer her.

"I? I have nothing to forgive, my darling," he said

at last. He had drawn her close to him. He went on speaking low and hurriedly. "But have you ever thought, Elisabel, how little you yourself really know about me, even now? You know how dearly I love you: that is much, but is it enough? I lived many, many years in the world before we ever saw each other. There is all my past life, the life I lived before I came to Whinbury, that you know nothing about. Do you never feel you would like to learn a little of it, Elisabel?—its ups and downs, its pleasures, and perhaps its great troubles? Why do you never ask me to tell you where I came from, and how all those years were spent?"

Her head was on his shoulder, his fingers lightly travelling over her cheek. Claud felt the cheek move away and burning lips caress his hand. The low, quiet laugh that followed, thrilled him through and through.

"Why should I want to know, Claud?" she asked with a kind of merry wonder. "'Tis you—now—that I love: 'tis your life to come that matters to me: not the years gone by. Oh! I cannot bear to think that you ever lived without me, that there was ever a time when I was nothing to you! I would stamp all those years out, if I could; but as I cannot, I want at least to forget them. And how could I do that if I made you talk of them? I know your life has been full of good; nothing but good all through. But you lived it without me, and so I hate it. Oh! Claud! leave it so! To-day I have you, and you have me; and 'tis to be so to-morrow, and next day, and for ever. That is all I want. The past, your past years and mine—— Oh! my darling! help me to forget!"

He listened breathlessly to every word, and there and then he could have fallen on his knees and worshipped her. Again she had become a new woman to him: another bright and glorious vista of her nature had been

revealed to his dazzled eyes. Humbly he thanked God for giving her to him, him of all men; and silently he prayed—there under the gaunt and minatory face of old Caleb—that some day he might become worthy of the trust.

Yet this eased his conscience not a jot. His duty was just as plain, albeit infinitely harder. Courage, resolution, however, were alike gone for the nonce; and in an hour he was once again taking his solitary way homeward to the old torment of long sleepless hours.

It was just this—her entire faith in him and entire absence of desire to learn anything of his past because it had been so much of his life lost to her—that stopped him every time. But to-morrow, he said to himself as he tossed feverishly on his bed in the grey darkness—to-morrow it should be otherwise. He would shut his ears to all these syren-calls of expediency. He would go straight to her directly his work was done: his first words to her, on meeting, should be of this thing. He would say it out, and have done with it; and know the worst or best.

But the early morning saw a messenger, a tiny pinafored urchin, climbing the hillside fearlessly through the surging hives; and, ransoming Elisabel's note with a hasty sixpence, Claud learnt that she could not meet him that day. Lucy Brent, it seemed, had taken her off to Stavisham by the early carrier's cart, and they would not return until long after nightfall.

The letter contained hints of necessary purchases to be made; and at that, and the whole event, Claud inwardly rejoiced. The truth was he had begun to fear that a deep-laid plot of his was going to miscarry. By himself, he knew, he would have made a wretched, bungling job of the affair. But taking Lucy and her brother into secret conclave, all the difficulties had been triumphantly

vanquished. Between Lucy's gentle finesse and Stephen's unblushing duplicity—playing the rich neighbour-friend with a passion for wedding-present giving—Claud thankfully realised that one of his most pressing problems had now been safely smoothed away.

A day, however, without Elisabel at the end of it, was to Claud now like a day bereft of all its sunshine and charm. He kept mechanically on at his task through the long hours of the morning, but heart and mind were alike far away on the dusty road to Stavisham, following the carrier's ramshackle van like a pair of faithful dogs. Claud worked alone amidst the hives. The General was shut up in the honey-house behind gauze-covered windows and doors, filling the super-crates with comb-frames and snow-white sections as though he laboured for his very life. So soon as he had prepared a barrowful of the crates, it was his duty to trundle his load down into the bee-farm, where Claud was ready to place the crates on the hives, while the General returned immediately at his own peculiar jog-trot for more. Thus, all the morning long, the latter spent only an occasional five minutes amongst his natural enemies, the bees; and for that, on such a morning, he was devoutly thankful.

For though the sun poured down out of a cloudless June sky, the breeze of yesterday had freshened to half a gale, and a madcap, venomous spirit was rife among the winged bee-nation. Laughton worked in an incessant whirling cloud of angry amazons, and every moment or two he must stop to scrape a sting out of his bare arms or chest. But none ventured under the broad brim of his old Panama hat, little as he troubled about such poignant attentions. He went unconcernedly on from hive to hive, seeing to the honey-chambers with all his accustomed care and discrimination; yet thinking all the time of a sturdy, black-robed figure side by side with

a little natty brown one, wandering through Stavisham High Street from shop to shop.

To-morrow—what would to-morrow hold for him?—he kept pondering to himself; and with each repetition of the query, his mood grew greyer and greyer. It was easy enough to make fine, high-flowing schemes for conduct when the time for their practical application remained indefinitely remote. But now that his last outpost had been driven in, and he was cheek by jowl with his enemy, the strain of waiting was almost too great to be borne. Yet why wait? He could be in Stavisham within the hour, even relying on Peavey's obese, deliberative pony; and once there, so far from home, it might be easier to——

At that, Claud Laughton's entire being came to a full-stop. He dropped the honey-rack he was holding, plump upon the seething hive below, and stared fixedly at the horizon, heedless of thirty thousand winged wantons, who were calling high Heaven to witness this desecration of their home. He took a quick stride forward, then went slowly ahead up the steep meadow until he reached the crest of pines roaring in the breeze at the extreme uppermost boundary of his property. And there at last he pulled himself sharply together.

"It is the living truth!" he cried aloud. "The living, rock-bottom truth! I cannot tell her now! Shame on me—yes!—but shame or no shame, there it is. I have left it too late. Three days only to her wedding-day! And to spring that on her now, at the eleventh hour, after keeping silence so long! Never! Never!—if silence costs me my very soul!"

Back at his work again, Claud Laughton was conscious of a feeling of intense relief, an upbuoying of heart such as he had not experienced for long days back.

He did not seek to whittle away the blame to himself

for his past procrastination. But he did begin to see now that he had much over-estimated the significance of this thing, both from Elisabel's standpoint and his own. After all, he said to himself, it was nothing, as the world goes. What did it really matter to her? He himself had done no wrong in the past, and would be doing none in the present or future according to any law of God or man. There was nothing of his own act, in his bygone unhappy wedded life, that he had reason to be ashamed of. And as for the whole drab story, well—no one but Lucy Brent knew anything of it here; and how should anyone, least of all Elisabel, come to a knowledge of events that had happened so far away, and so many years ago? He would pledge his life that Lucy herself would never betray the confidence he had placed in her. No! the thing was all dead and gone, and to rake it up on a mere quixotic quibble would be the worst of folly. Only a few days more!—his wedding-day next Tuesday! Well, Monday night should see the old Claud Laughton buried fathoms deep, and Tuesday should see a new and true man born.

CHAPTER XVII

WEDDING BELLS

"WELL, General, judging by the look of you, anyone would think it was your own wedding morning!"

The speaker was Doctor Stephen Brent, and he sat on the table in the big living-room of the Bee-Barn, swinging his legs and jovially eyeing the figure before him.

Stephen himself presented a sufficiently ornate appearance, in his smart sea-surgeon's clothes, gold-braided and buttoned, and touched with scarlet on the shoulder; but the General eclipsed him, from every standpoint. By itself, the ancient frock-coat with baggy skirts and high velvet collar, would have singled its wearer out in any company; but adding to this tight trousers in Bedford-cord of so decided a buff as to be indistinguishable from mustard, a huge white satin stock covered with sky-blue anchors, a broad-brimmed clerical felt hat, out of whose band stuck up innumerable woodcock's feathers, a waistcoat of moleskin, a silver watch-chain like a ship's cable, and gloves of spotless white kid—the General afforded an example of rustic festival attire surpassing anything Stephen had ever seen.

Stephen Brent swung his legs, and puffed at his pipe, and eyed the quaint figure before him humorously.

"You know, General, this is a dangerous sort of business

to be at, for marriageable young fellows of your stamp. I don't know how you've the pluck to go. The church will be full of pretty damsels, all in their best, and all wishing they stood at the altar, instead of in the pews. Why! one of them might suddenly take it into her head to——"

"Stephen! For the love of goodness come up here a moment!"

The voice came from the heights, from Claud's bedroom, in fact, up in the eastern bay. An anxious face appeared in the doorway at the top of the ladder-stair.

"If any man ought to know how to tie a sailor's knot, it should be you. Do come and help me! It is getting late, and I have spoilt two already!"

Stephen was up the ladder, and at his friend's throat, in a trice.

"It isn't late," he said reassuringly. "There is a good hour yet. But keep still, and look at the ceiling, or I can't possibly—— Jove! Claud! what a fluster you are in! One would think you were going to be hanged instead of married!"

The man in the chair laughed nervously. He screwed his eyes down until he got a view of Stephen's face. A fine face, he thought, finer than he had ever realised; ruddy and strong, the high forehead surmounted by a mass of tight, ebony curls—a sort of black and red Byron, as Claud had once heard him described. And the remembrance of whom it was had said the thing, turned his mind to a piece of village news garnered by the General only that morning.

"Have you heard, Steve?" he said rather disjointedly, for the professional grip was hard upon his throat. "Have you heard that Rose Petherway went away yesterday?—to Marshminster, they say. Off in the brougham, the General tells me, with the big wagonette

stuffed full of luggage following behind. She always moves with as much impedimenta as an invading army."

The black eyes close to Claud's face opened wide. Stephen stepped back to admire his finished work.

"There! that's a beauty, Claud. The best I ever tied, so don't disgrace me by rumpling it before the wedding. Gone to Marshminster, you say? No, I had not heard it. Lucy was wondering why she did not come to look at the school needlework yesterday, but that explains it. All the better. Now let us go down into the garden and stroll about a bit until the bell starts: the air will do you good."

"Why did you say 'All the better,' Steve?" Claud abruptly asked his best-man, after they had idled to and fro together for a while amidst the sunny flower-beds. It was the first word that had passed between them since leaving the house. Stephen Brent seemed at a loss.

"Well, it is all the better, isn't it?" he said at length, and took a sweeping golf-stroke at a daisy with his cane.

"Steve, on my honour, I never gave her any real cause to believe— I know there was a lot of talk about us in the village, and you must have heard it; but—but nothing really passed between us, Steve; nothing to bind either. And then this—this other came, and I—I——"

Another daisy-head flew skyward. Burly Stephen Brent swung round and met his friend eye to eye.

"Are you in any doubt of what you are going to do to-day?"

"Doubt? I in doubt, Steve?—no! But you see how I am moved—flustered, you called it. Well, what is there in this thing to fluster a man on the wrong side of thirty-six, one who has knocked about in the world as I have done, one who must be as sure of himself as I? What flusters me, do you think?"

"You ought to know what you are about, I should say."

"And I do. Elisabel March—I love her truly, her only and wholly. With every thought of my mind I love her, and with every fibre and every drop of blood in my body. Literally, she is all the world to me now; and I cannot endure the thought of any life without her, either on this side of the grave or the other. But that is where the trouble comes in. Stephen, the truth is I did not really know her until I had won her. Even then, though I knew I had got with her love and loveliness, it was only by degrees I came to know the rest. And it is the rest that makes me afraid. The rest is all crystal-clear purity, a deep faith that is not merely part of her—it is her very self. Religion, if you like—I do not mean the ordinary feeling of women who go regularly to church, but something much deeper and finer that she has found out for herself from her Bible and through her prayers. Don't you begin to see what flusters me, Stephen? In all this she is to me unapproachable, sundered from me, as I am now. It would be idle not to see that it forms the greater part of her; that unless I can change myself, or be changed somehow, we can never be one in any true sense. And that I cannot bear the thought of. I want her—and will have her—all of her, for my own for ever. Well, it can only come about in one way, a way I almost despair of ever making good. She is going to marry me to-day—within the hour; our earthly lives are to run side by side for many long years, perhaps. But this will not, and cannot, bring us really together. There is no true marriage but the marriage of hearts. And that can only come between Elisabel March and me when I have made myself, or some miracle of grace has made me, like to her. I must do it somehow; but how, and through what pains and lapse of time? Steve, don't you see this is not my wedding-morning alone—that brings me no fear but only joy: it is all this other which must begin for

me to-day. That is troubling me more than I can tell."

Stephen Brent had listened intently through all this subdued yet passionate outflow. He was silent, and seemed to be still listening, long after Claud had ceased.

"Claud, I believe you," he said at last, and with a curious abruptness. "None could help believing you. No! you need not be in any doubt. You are doing the right thing, and all must come right for you both in the end. But—but——" He stopped, glanced away a moment, then turned a face full of irrepressible wonder on his friend. "What—what an amazing man!"

And while Claud was looking his astonishment at this cryptic utterance, the bell in the church tower began its merry chime, such a chime as only Peavey could draw from it when engaged on his favourite task of ringing in a wedding. The General came hurrying over to them, carrying three buttonholes of white flowers. Side by side, with the General ambling along a little in the rear, they went down the path of the bee-farm, and thence through a by-lane towards the church.

Though it was early yet, they found the dim little place already three parts full of whispering folk gaily dressed as for a holiday. The rectory pew, the foremost and roomiest pew of all, had been reserved for the bridegroom's party; and here the three sat down to wait through the ten minutes or so which must elapse before the coming of the bride. Claud had taken a swift look round him on his entry, but now sat with his hand over his eyes. He had noted the emptiness of the Petherway pew, scarce expecting it otherwise. Presently, however, the hush around him was broken by a sound familiar to all. It was the rustle of Mrs. Petherway's silken Sunday gown. It came up the aisle behind Claud like a south-west wind escaped from the neighbouring pine-trees, almost drowning

the note of the bell for the time being. But it soon died down. The merry quiet tolling got the ascendancy once more. The whispered chorus went on. A beam of sunshine threw a rainbow glow across the chancel, transforming a bank of lilies by Lucy's harmonium, and setting a patch of incongruous crimson on her pale grave face.

But now there was a sudden stir amongst the crowd by the open west door. The bell rang a double peal, then stopped. Lucy's wheezy instrument struck up an anthem, and the congregation rose. Amidst the general titter of suppressed excitement, the General's mouth was clapped to Laughton's ear.

"Sech a fambly paarty a-comin', maaster, as never was! There be ould Simeon Maarch, Caleb's own brother, as has futted it thirty mile to gie th' bride away. An' cousins, an' sech-like—no end to 'em, from all paarts! Ould Mistus Wellow as keeps th' 'Six Bells' at Ambledown; an' John Lowe from Stavisham, him as has th' scissors-shop by th' North Gate, doan't ye mind? Ay! an' young Sam Barnicott hoame from sea; and that there niece o' Mistus Maarch's, what they calls 'Fiery-Ed'; an'——"

Claud's hand, gently laid upon the General's shoulder, cut off the rest of this harangue. The patch of sunlit green visible through the west door, blotted out with a medley of figures. The harmonium got into its most joyful strain. Claud and his best-man stepped out into the open space by the chancel steps, and stood quietly awaiting the approach of the party.

Two by two and arm in arm in a long formal string, they came up the aisle of the little church. For an instant Claud's eyes took in the foremost male figure, that of Simeon March, with its creasy black broadcloth, immense white choker, high bald head, and rim of grizzly beard.

But a moment more, and he had forgotten the very existence of all save the one who leant on the shambling old rustic's arm. Elisabel, the cottage girl, she whose kith and kin were numbered among the lowly ones of the soil, whose blood was of the simplest peasant stock—why, she walked like a queen! Like a queen she carried her dark head high amidst its cloud of white veiling. Snow-white she was from head to foot, and almost as white her calm face glimmering through the swaying folds of gauze. No vestige of colour anywhere in its pearly sweetness—none but the twin red rose-leaves of her lips and the winter-twilight blue that shone in her eyes. Claud's own face, until that moment pale enough under its bronze, flushed deep as she came to a halt before him. Pride in her, love for her, humble thankfulness that it was he, and no other man, who stood there to be made her husband, filled his heart high and suddenly. It was as though a flood-gate had opened and charged the dried-up river-bed of his life with the same pure current on which she floated, sweeping all old barriers for ever away. For the first time he felt himself very near to her. No longer he feared to place the ring upon her finger. It was no vain cry now—that the old Claud Laughton was to be buried this day and a new one born—with all his heart he believed it on the verge of real accomplishment. Filled at once with a strange excitement and as strange a calm, fearless at last for the future, he took his place by Elisabel's side at the chancel steps as his own by privilege and right.

The service went by like a dream to Claud Laughton; like a dream where a lifetime is spent in a moment. The solemn ritual and music; the intonation of the priest; his own voice sounding so strange in that place, and Elisabel's so natural and meet; the thrilling touch of her hand, and the glitter of the new ring upon her finger,

and again that strange voice of his promising to wed and worship and endow—it all passed before his senses like a play of which he was at once chief enactor and a dazed, delighted looker-on.

And then a burst of music seemed to break down something, and he fell broad awake. The scene in the play changed from solemn spaciousness, where he had been alone with Elisabel, to close, wainscotted walls, where he stood with his new-made wife at the vortex of a smiling, congratulating company. The little vestry had crammed itself full to the brim. There was the wet ink glittering on the book where they had signed their names. Stephen Brent was claiming the first kiss from the bride, Mr. Jenyns had gripped him by one hand, old Simeon March by the other, and half a dozen hands were thumping heartily on his back and shoulders.

"Laughton, my boy, God's blessing on this day, and all it has in store for both of you! Oh, yes! of course I am coming to the breakfast! I would not miss it for a thousand——"

"My respects, sir, an' best o' good fortun', an' may ye allers ha' sunshine i' life same as——"

"Look at her, now! Did ever ye see 'un so purty! There be allers good luck i' white weddin's. My ould mither allers said as when the bride and the cake bean't white alike, summat be sure to goo awry."

"Lor'! Mistus Maarch!—laughin' wi' wan eye, an' cryin' wi' t'other!—jest as if ye wur 'aaf glad an' 'aaf sorry! Brisk up, wun't ye? And sech a real fine figure o' a man, for all a' be gentle-born!"

"Now you can have one, Claud! But be sharp about it: we must get on. Shiver my timbers! what a ridiculously happy face!"

Many a time in past years Claud had met in the village, and stepped aside to watch, one of the old-fashioned

country walking-weddings; but he had never thought of himself as chief participator in such an event. Yet here he was, parading down the high-street, his young wife on his arm, and a long comet-tail of jubilant folk stretching behind.

The bell was hard at its tuneful work again, from every open door or window on the way came vociferous greetings, and at intervals a tremendous explosion shook the sunny air. Joe Fladgate was "firing his anvils," as he always did on festive occasions. In the centre of the green he had planted four of them in a row, upside down, their hollow under-parts filled with powder rammed tight home with a wedge. And as the bridal train wound its way into view, Joe, in his Sunday best, was seen to lie down flat upon the grass with a fusee at the end of a pole; whereupon high Heaven split asunder, and all the windows in Whinbury began to add their clatter to the general rejoicing.

What with friends to greet by the way, and nosegays to take from children ambushing them at every corner, it was some time before they reached the cottage down by the riverside. But it was gained at last, and two by two the procession filed through the gap in the barberry hedge. No single apartment in the little mushroom dwelling was nearly spacious enough to hold the company, and the wedding breakfast had been laid out of doors under the shade of the great damson-tree. Thither, at a word from Mrs. March, Claud presently led the way; and soon the whole company was gathered round the table, bent on making this stage in the day's proceedings as successful as all that had gone before.

"Claud, this is going to be the most beautiful time of our lives. Lucy says so, and she knows all about cottage-weddings. So don't miss a word or a thing."

In the confusion and hubbub that went on while the

party were being allotted their seats, Stephen's words, scarce heeded at the moment, returned to Claud with all the force of realised meaning.

It was in truth a beautiful thing that was being enacted before his eyes. He sat at the head of the table, side by side with Elisabel; and, facing them at the far end, sat Uncle Simeon and Mrs. March. Not one table but many went to make up the festal board. Everything remotely resembling a table, even the trestle-benches from the wash-house, had been pressed into service, no matter its size or shape; so that the whole formed a zigzag expanse between the new-wedded couple and the old folk facing them, looking like some giant game of dominoes whose pips were represented by heaped-up dishes, flagons of ale and mead, vases of flowers—a game, however, whose cards were all double-sixes, for hardly a square inch of the white damask cloth could be seen.

About this generous array of good things was ranged a concourse of people, one for the moment in intent and good will, but of such a diversity as, Claud verily believed, could never have been got together before.

He leant back in his chair and let his charmed eyes dwell on each face in turn. There was Mr. Jenyns close by Mrs. March, looking, for all his determined geniality, much like a spirit strayed from another world. Stephen Brent sat midway down the board, leading the laughter for all around him; and Lucy was wedged into an angle opposite, faithfully seconding her brother's jovial task. At first Claud could see nothing of the General, but at length discovered him under an immense brown silk elbow a few seats away. Beyond the brown silk, Claud was glad to mark the clever, haggard face of Seth Caplin, the cobbler-philosopher of Whinbury; doubly glad because he knew that Seth was there in honour alike of both. John Lowe, the Stavisham cutler, was easily distinguishable, for his

immense presence dominated a whole wash-bench, just as it seemed to fill his dark little shop at home. Mrs. Wellow from Ambledown was of even more generous calibre: Claud looked at her with affectionate, but rather fearsome admiration.

These were the main pillars that upheld the assembly, the great outstretching branches of this wonderful family-tree with which he had allied himself. For the rest—the slender twigs, the crowd of happy young faces gathered from far and near about him—Claud felt his heart go out to every one of them in turn, and he looked at each again and again as the meal went on. At a moment when the clatter of the feast was at its height, and the general attention, the merry challenge of tongues and glances, momentarily withdrawn from the pair behind the bride-cake, Claud's hand stole down by his side. At once warm fingers were locked within his own under the safe cover of the tablecloth.

"'Lisbel," he said, and at his imitation of the Whinbury talk burring so richly all around them, he found a whole new depth and quality in her laugh. "'Lisbel, 'tis like th' ould Bible-story, d'ye mind, lass?"

Her whisper came in choicest Marshminster, to reprove him.

"Do you mean where they sent out into the highways and hedges, and brought in all the——"

"No, no! dear wife and dearest friend!" It was Gentleman-Laughton's voice, clear, refined, deliberate, that stopped her. And then the voice broke and fell, the hand tightened on hers. "No: not that, darling, but the other." His voice sank to a breath. "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge; and nought but death part thee and me."

And now the general hilarity had reached that point

when it no longer sufficed to indulge in intervals, however frequent, of private felicitation with one's neighbour on the joyful business that had brought all to that spot. Some common voice must be upraised to express aloud the common feeling. With a terrific "Hem!" from the deep pedal-pipe of his wiry throat, old Simeon March got first upon his knuckles and then upon his feet.

"Reverend Sir, an' frien's all!"

At once the babel of talk died down to a single pair of laughing voices, then to a solitary irrelevant chuckle from Sam Barnicott, and finally to expectant silence. Uncle Simeon stretched a lean, gnarled hand aloft, and opened his mouth wide.

"Frien's all, ould an' young, from near an' far; an' no matter how ye've come, 'tis a trew wured an' never a lie, as th' ouldest pair o' legs here this day ha' come th' longest road. Maarch be my name, and maarch my natur'. Thirty mile I ha' traipsed, up hill an' down dale, to see ut. An' to see what? An' wherefore? Why, jest to see a knot tied."

Uncle Simeon was jerking his thumbs up and down in the armholes of his flowered satin waistcoat. The fire of oratory began to gleam in his eye.

"Now, there be all sorts o' knots i' life, as a few on ye knaws, an' many on ye has still to find out. Some o' these here knots has got to be tied, an' some to be loosed, an' some jest slashed asunder anyways, or Him as ye dursn't mention ull be gettin' round 'tarnal hot an' quick to your hindersides. But leave that be, I says. Th' Reverend here, 'a knaws what I mane, so let ut bide. 'Tis not o' false knots, all tangled an' jammed up, that 'ull yield to nought but th' knife o' Glory, as I warnts to speak, here i' this jyeful gatherin'. 'Tis o' trew knots, an' th' best o' all on 'em, th' Trew-Lovers'-Knot, as we ha' all seen tied to-day. Little 'Lisbel, an' you, sir, as

sets alongside o' her—here be my love an' blessin's on ye both this happy day o' days. An' may there be lots o' honey fer ye all your lives. An' may this here knot, as we see tied up there i' th' ould church where wan o' ye wur christened—may it only get tauter and trewer wi' every year o' bliss that goos by. Seventy-five, I be; an' here be five-an'-seventy good wishes fer ye both—wan fer every year o' my life."

He raised his foaming mether high, and every arm followed suit. When the uproar and merry confusion of voices had subsided, Claud found himself the focus of all eyes. There was no help for it. He took Elisabel's hand in his, and together they rose to their feet.

The sun had travelled far while they had been carousing, and now it looked under the canopy of the old damson-tree, raking the table fore and aft with its glad light. Husband and wife stood erect, hand in hand, in the full flood of its radiance. Quietly, yet with every word distinct and clear, Claud Laughton spoke his mind.

Choosing the simplest words, he told them of his gladness to be there among them; of his pride in being just like themselves,—a man getting his daily bread out of the soil; of his love for her who stood beside him, and of the riches she brought with her in her love for him, which he accounted as treasure untold. He spoke of the future, and his hope that those before him, who claimed kinship with his wife, would now admit him to the same fellowship,—accept him, from that day onward, as one of themselves, knit with them in the same bond of labour, going with them shoulder to shoulder on the same road of life.

As he went on, his voice got lower and slower, until at last he ceased. He took up the quaint old pitcher brimming with mead at his side. And there and then, in the rich flood of afternoon sunshine, these two drank a loving-cup together, while all voices joined in a deafening

chorus of congratulation, and the General blubbered, openly and undisguisedly, with a fist to each eye.

Thereafter followed more speeches; more stone flagons journeyed from the cellar; a box of cigars appeared mysteriously in front of Stephen Brent, and soon a cloud of fragrant smoke uplifted from all sides. It was well on to four o'clock before Mrs. March rose and signalled to Elisabel. It was a sign for which all the younger members had been eagerly waiting. As if by magic the cloth was cleared, the various tables and benches carried away to the house. Soon the broad space of beaten earth under the great tree held nothing but crumbs and the gay remnants of crackers; and even these an industrious besom in the hands of a scarlet-coated, scarlet-faced marine, was whisking out of sight.

"What is coming now?" whispered Claud in Stephen's ear, as the two stood aside together for a moment, out of the way of the busy crew.

"What is coming now?" Stephen Brent's eyes glowed with the pleasure of a boy at a school-treat. "Why, the best part of the beautiful time! Six or eight hours of it, Claud. And don't forget: you've got to dance with every woman here, or you'll never be forgiven!"

A burst of music coming down the path from the house turned all eyes in that direction. It was Sam Barnicott and his shipmate, the marine, with penny-whistle and concertina. Two barrels were set up under the tree, and chairs placed upon them. The musicians were hoisted to their perches by half a dozen willing hands, and soon the whole company was whirling in the dance.

From their little chamber-window high up in the gable of the Bee-Barn, Claud and Elisabel looked forth into the summer night.

To be alone together, that had been the one wish of

each all through the trying day and endless, uproarious evening; and now at last the wish was realised. Silently they sat together, hearing the same low stir of life, sharing the same soft breath of western air, watching the same midnight stars.

For a long while,—as they sat side by side, his arms about her, her dark head pillowed on his shoulder,—they had seen the Chinese lanterns glimmering far below amidst the foliage of the Marchs' garden, and had heard the shrill music of whistle and concertina softened to a mere fairy tinkling borne to them uncertainly on the gentle breeze. But now the last spark of light, and the last note of revelry, had died away. All the village slumbered. In the grey darkness a nightingale sang on and on, alone with her music. Below in the bee-farm every hive sent forth a murmur of eager life. So loud and clear was this note in the quiet of the summer midnight, that Elisabel rose at last and leant out of the little window. He saw the outline of her face dark upon a field of stars.

"What a noise they make!" she said. "'Tis like thunder underground. The old straw hives—they never talk like that. What do you do to them, to make them so busy and loud?"

He leaned out with her.

"To-morrow you shall see. To-morrow we begin our work together, and you will come to know everything in time. There is no magic in it: only thought and hard work and——"

"To-morrow!" It was sheer delight that trembled in her voice as she echoed the word. She leant her white arms on the sill, and her chin upon her hands, looking steadily out before her. "To-morrow—I have thought of it all day, and dreamed of it at night—oh! for so many long weeks! And to-morrow I am to help you—you!"

"Yes, to-morrow," he answered her. "And the next day, and all through the long years for ever. I have dreamed of it, too, my dear, my dear! Not for weeks only, but for long, long years, the dead wasted years I lived without you. Yes! all my life I have dreamed of you and this time. For it was you, really you, and none other, who filled my thoughts; and well I know it now. How it all comes back to me! But it was a woman with a veiled face and nameless. Now the veil is gone. The dream has come true. I see you, and have you for ever, and know your name—my darling wife, my Elisabel!"

He heard her sob, but the faint starlight showed him only curves of joy in her face. His hand lay on the sill of the window: she bent her lips to it quickly, impulsively.

"How I am blessed!" she cried. "How I will love you, and care for you, dear! And work hard to make your home comfortable and sweet o' evenings, after the long day's work! You shall always be glad you waited so long for me, and kept true to your dream."

She laid her cool forehead upon his hand, and was silent a long while. The nightingale sang on in the grey dusk, and the bees kept up their subterranean melody. Presently he lifted her in his arms.

"Come," said he. "You are tired. And the night is far spent."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HONEY-FLOW

WHEN bee-men foregather over pipe and glass for chat about old times, it is never long before the famous honey-year of 18— sifts up in someone's memory. Each has his tale to tell of that wonderful summer of warm sunset showers, and calm nights, and glowing sultry days; month after month when all the fields breathed honey, and, rain or shine, the bees were out from dawn to dusk of the western sky, possessed with a very fury of treasure-getting.

"A good season?" said Claud Laughton, answering the Reverend's question, on a chance meeting with him one morning. "A good season?—why, honey is coming in so fast that the three of us together hardly know what to do with it."

A smile crept up Mr. Jenyns' austere face almost to the mouth-corners.

"The three of you? That sounds good. But indeed I often look across to the hill from the rectory window, and see three figures where I used to see only two. It is a great thing you have done, Laughton. You are in for good times, I think."

Claud held the grave kindly glance for a moment.

"You know how the children come out, when school is up?" he said, "quiet and orderly until they are clear of the door, and then it is all laughter and merry shouting

down the street? Well, my hard school is up for ever, I verily believe. And I could laugh and shout every moment of my life with the youngest in the village."

At that, Mr. Jenyns came as near to a laugh as Claud had ever known him. But it was gone in a moment. He stood a while thoughtfully swinging a black glove by one finger-tip.

"But you never did what I asked you to do, that night," he said presently. "I felt a little hurt about it at first, until I realised your preoccupations. Of course, if I had guessed how things were really going, Laughton, I should never have—— You quite understand I was acting on a false assumption concerning you?"

"You mean about Tom Petherway, Mr. Jenyns?" replied Claud, rather shamefacedly. "I am sorry, and you are much readier to forgive me than I am to forgive myself. But I had no real chance to speak to him at first, and then there came difficulties. He is going on no better, I hear."

"Worse and worse, I am afraid. But I am not going to cloud your clear sky with troubles you have no part nor lot in. Good-bye. Think of me sometimes as watching the three people from my study-window, and being very, very glad about you."

Claud Laughton started on his way home without the usual song upon his lips. But before he reached the bee-farm gate, he was humming as blithely as ever. He had spoken the truth about his life. Caleb March's old donkey, Blossom, munching and drowsing in her clover-paddock hard by, had seen no such transformation as he; and the General was an equally delighted participator in the new order of things. Of late, in their talks together, these two had given over the ancient topics for the one all-absorbing consideration.

"A noo pin?" the General had said to Claud only that

morning, in fine scornful rhapsody, "a noo pin?—'tis but dirt—naun but a pigscot 'longside o' our Bee-Barn! Clane!—there be no wured for't! Oh! maaster! ye wur i' luck's way, that day o' th' ringin'! To think how us pore creeturs muddled and mired along all they yeers an' yeers! An' now look at it! Ne'er a speck nowheres, and rations fit fer a field-marshal all ready to th' tick o' th' clock, fower times a day, an' seven days a week, an'——"

"Ah! but you're leaving out the best, General! Remember what the place was like—silent as the grave, except when your blob-tongue was going. We were two lone men in a dreary tank—no more. But now listen! The old place has come alive, and stuffed itself full of sunshine and nightingales! Just hark at her singing, and her broom knocking, and look at her dust flying out at the lucky old door! General! I'd sooner be the doorstep there, with a chance of her treading on me, than the top-beam on a king's palace!"

But as soon as her housework was done for the morning, Elisabel would come racing down the path at top speed, pulling on her blue gauze veil and armlets as she came, eager to share in the task that was her chief delight.

All day long the three laboured thus together. Though Claud had a profound veneration for the ancient ways of bee-tending in which she had been nurtured, and Elisabel's prejudice against modern honey-craft was too ingrained a thing ever to be quite resolved, they had both realised from the beginning how necessity must govern their plan of life. She must learn the new ways, and he must teach her. Yet, for all his admiration of her quickness, her adaptability, he was little prepared for the ease and thoroughness with which she acquired the new art.

In a few days he was leaving her to work by his side with no more than an occasional overruling glance or word

of guidance; in a week a great block of hives had been made over to her sole charge: a month saw Elisabel handling her bees with a sure dexterity and judgment that not only left the General hopelessly in the rear, but even threatened to outvie Claud's own veteran craft.

But the new was not wholly to oust the old. Claud had been as good as his word in the matter of the ancient donkey: he did not forget his covenant with Whinbury bees. He had said to himself that the old bee-garden should be preserved in all its ancient picturesqueness; and, to that end, scarce a day passed but he journeyed thither with Elisabel to do what might be needed, if only for an odd half-hour.

There was little enough that could be usefully done, it was true. Once the swarming-fever had burnt itself out, and all the skeps, old and new, provided with roomy caps, snugly protected from the weather, human interference could avail nothing. These hours spent together down in the old garden usually resolved themselves into quiet saunterings up and down, or periods of rest in shady corners, when Claud smoked his pipe and Elisabel plied her ever-busy needle.

Talk at these times went all manner of ways, and Claud was never tired of leading her into unfrequented bypaths of philosophy, often himself feigning ignorance of their intellectual whereabouts, so that he might have the delight of studying her original methods of extrication. But most of all he loved to sit and watch her when, after one of those gay medleys of words borne along on mountain-rills of laughter, she often fell curiously silent and grave. Then she would be still for a long time, her eyes upon her work, the dark lashes at rest on the full, pale cheeks; and Claud would sit eyeing her as though he were trying to read in a book of marvels and mysteries a little beyond his ken.

At these times he would often pull himself up sharply: rise, and go wandering down to the river-bank to gaze on the waters and consider things alone.

Was it good and right, he would question himself, or was it bad and wrong, for a responsible human being to be thus wholly absorbed in, given up body and soul to, another, even though the two were husband and wife?

In the old days he had felt himself a free man, in spite of the loneliness, the unhappy moods and memories. But now he could not honestly say that his life held one waking moment unfilled with devotion for Elisabel; and was this still freedom—something meet for manhood—or was it something that might be given another name, to his final cost?

He always met the problem by fleeing it, going back to the seat on the mossy stole of the old apple-tree where he had left Elisabel, and urging her to laugh his doubts away. But at length she solved the difficulty for him, though all unknowingly. One day, when he had left her abruptly thus, and had returned to her side, finding her in the same posture and in the same pondering mood, she had startled him by a sudden straight look and a dwelling hand upon his shoulder.

"Dear, dear! we must remember!" she said to him, her voice full alike of love and warning. "All the happiness given us now, the beautiful sweet life with one another—'tis like money paid to us for corn not yet sown. We must sow, and reap, and faithfully deliver, in the time to come, or the price will be asked of us again, maybe twofold. In all my life gone by there is nothing worth a moment of your love, dear. No! I have still to sow and reap for it; yet I know of nothing precious enough to sow."

And he, in turn, though just as unwittingly, comforted her:

"Love for love: each is both price and harvest for

the other, Elisabel. Be sure of this—while each keeps bright and strong, there can be no recalling. Yet you are right. We must remember, and labour in other ways than with our hands. Only you must teach me, and lead me, choose both sowing-time and seed, or I at least am lost."

June passed. July came, and the summer sun got into its fiercest stride. Now began the five or six weeks beloved of the ancient bee-masters; when Sirius, the Honey-Star, lording it invisibly over the blue midday heaven, was supposed to rain down celestial matter into the parched throats of the flowers. Be that as it might, there was no doubt of the honey-flow in this miraculous season. From morning to night the Bee-Barn folk ran a neck-and-neck race with the hives. The first glimpse of dawn saw all three astir: Elisabel throwing open doors and windows to let in the cool, sweet breath and music of the morning; the General toiling up the path with sticks for the fire; Claud already out and about, planning the day's work, or intent on his accounts at the corner desk, until the chime of Elisabel's voice drew two grateful hungry men to a dainty table where the fragrance of the viands contended with that of new-plucked flowers.

Long as the days were throughout this halcyon time, they were never long enough. Though the three worked together from morning's break far into each ruddy evening dusk, and accomplished marvels, the bees kept always a little ahead of them in the race. The honey-chambers seemed to fill themselves as if by magic. The General's barrow was for ever groaning and grating up the path under its load of brimming crates, or clattering down with its stack of empty ones. Used as he was to the work of lifting the heavy super-chambers from the hives, Claud's back ached at the end of each day as though he had been cudgelled; and Elisabel—whose task now it was to follow him, whisking the empty racks into place and

closing down the rifled hives, as they went along together—was herself glad enough when the failing light stopped work for the day.

Thus while the sun shone. When it rained, there was still work enough indoors. All day long then they kept fast to the honey-house. Here the great extracting-machine kept up its monotonous whirr, and the sound of the honey flying from the combs was strangely like the pelt of the rain upon the windows. Much as she loved to work among the hives under the hot summer sun, Elisabel dearly prized these days of house-bound weather. She sat at the table, folding the white wood section-boxes, or busied herself with fresh arrangement of the honey-stores. But wherever her own task lay, she contrived to keep in touch with the talk and rousing business of the extracting-room. The rumble of the machine, the swishing song of the flying honey within and pelting rain outside, the red glow of the little stove and glitter of dripping sweets; the two figures, each in its white linen overalls and cap, so akin yet so utterly unlike—it all made up a picture on which she was never tired of gazing with quiet, heartfelt enjoyment.

It was her time, the season of her triumph—she, the month-old bride. Supreme she reigned here, and well she knew it. Near upon two hundred hives there were on Whinbury Bee-Farm, and each had its queen; but she was the chief queen-bee, as Claud loved to tell her, and had the most sumptuous hive. There were only two subjects in her realm, indeed, but at her slightest word each sprang to do her bidding like ten thousand. It was her time, but she never deceived herself; never confounded present certain good with presumptive Paradise. She treasured every moment as though it held all her life's happiness; and not, as her young heart ever tried to cajole her, but a thimbleful dipped out of measureless joy.

CHAPTER XIX

A LETTER FROM LONDON

"MY dear Miss Petherway:

"After so many letters from me telling of nothing but failure, and so many from you breathing only kindness and encouragement, it gives me more than ordinary satisfaction to write this one, wherein you will see I have at last really something definite to report.

"It turns out exactly as I thought regarding your neighbour. I am seldom wrong in my remembrance of faces, and I believed all along that I had made no mistake in the case of this mysterious bee-person. I strongly suspected, on first meeting him, that he was a man with a dubious past; and certain facts which have now come to my knowledge, reduce these early suspicions to absolute certainty. These facts I will give you as simply as I can, leaving you to judge whether they are of sufficient importance to warrant their being made known in Whinbury for the public interest. As far as the poor misguided girl is concerned, I deplore as deeply as you do yourself that it is now too late for anyone to help her; even if a knowledge of what I am going to relate would at any time have preserved her from the foolish step she has taken without chance of recall.

"Probably you will not remember the 'Lil Vavasour' divorce case, which was all the rage in the papers about

twelve years ago. Lil Vavasour was a music-hall dancer and singer, well known, or, rather, I should say, notorious, for her reputation was of the very worst. She was, of course, a great attraction to all the men about town. Among the frequenters of the hall where she appeared, was a young man who was going the pace, as they say; and this young man, a journalist, with apparently plenty of money, fell violently in love with Lil Vavasour, became entangled with her, and finally married her, in spite of her cloud of admirers, most of whom, no doubt, could have given him a very sufficient reason against this mad step, if he had been willing to take advice.

"This much I am able to tell you from my own memory. Shortly after the marriage, however, my regiment was ordered to India, so for what follows I am indebted to a close research among the newspapers of the time. It appears that Lil Vavasour endured the restraining delights of holy matrimony for but a short period, less than twelve months, in fact. Then the papers came out with staring headlines and long reports, day by day, of the divorce proceedings instituted by her husband against her and a co-respondent, who, it seems, was a broken-down performer in her own line. I will not give you the distressing and very unsavoury details of the case. I will pass on to its unexpected tragic finish. That the evidence was going all against Lil Vavasour, and that her husband was certain to win his suit, does not seem to me sufficient reason for her committal of the act, because it implies a certain shame and contrition in her, which is inconceivable in such a woman. But whatever her motive, the next thing I read in the paper is the startling fact of her suicide, when her cross-examination was only part over, and the consequent sudden termination of the case.

"What happened afterwards to her husband, I do not

know. I have tried to trace him, but without success. All I have found out, through many costly inquiries, is that he was never again seen in his old pleasure haunts; that he stayed on at his rooms in Kensington, and at his employment in Fleet Street, for about six months; but that then he suddenly and completely disappeared from both, leaving a month's rent on the mantelpiece at one, and a letter of resignation at the other. Yet though the man has succeeded in thus completely wiping himself out of all knowledge, his name is still in the records, and still well remembered by his old associates, in spite of its being so long ago. And the name of the man was, and is, Claud Laughton."

Rose Petherway left off reading, to think. The letter had been brought to her just as she was starting for her morning ride, and had been thrust into her pocket unread, after a careless glance at the writing on the envelope. She had received so many in the same hand, and had got nothing but irritation from them, that she was in no hurry to discompose herself over this one. But stopping at length to breathe her horse at the top of one of the highest hills on the Downland range, she remembered Roper's letter and carelessly drew it forth.

"A miserable cheat, and I a fool! There were a good pair of us!" she murmured, as she tore the letter open, her pretty teeth setting hard together. "What windy rubbish now, I wonder? Three long sheets packed full of——"

She stopped. Her brows knit suddenly together. She read on for the first few pages without a break, almost without a breath. And then she left off reading, to think.

"Oh, ho!" It was a curious, low, shrill sound, a sort of keyhole music, that presently drove through her teeth.

"Oh, ho! Master Gentleman-Laughton! So that is your story, is it? What a piece of news for Whinbury! And what will your milk-white fawn think of it, when I——"

She turned in the saddle and looked back towards the village lying far below, green-shrouded and cool under the sweltering July sun. Her eyes filled with angry tears.

"No!" she cried, so vehemently that the horse started beneath her. "No! Even if he has never told her, it is not enough! It is nothing! She would only storm for a night or two, then forgive him! And then they would brazen it out together until it was forgotten by all. No! I was a fool to read any more of the balderdash. I said I would not! Here it goes!"

She tore the letter across and across, but stopped on a second impulse; and fitting the sheets together again, read them through to the end.

"Now, my dear Miss Petherway, you know all that I have found out for a certainty; and probably the same thought will at once occur to you as occurred to me. It is true that I have not detailed to you all the stories concerning this person's early life which your generosity, inspired by your unselfish solicitude for the public morals of your native place, has enabled me to obtain. Nor could I repeat to a pure-minded lady one tithe of all that has transpired with reference to the career of the abominable woman, his associate. But, even when all is considered, it is clear to me that we have not sufficient legal ground on which to base a public indictment which would serve to drive this very undesirable person from your midst. As the world looks at these things, and in the popular phrase—he is more sinned against than sinning. I greatly doubt the wisdom, therefore, of as yet divulging anything of the story.

"But though for the moment I am unable to bring any

other charge against this person, it by no means follows that there is none to bring. On the contrary, I am firmly convinced that there is something else, and something of a very grave character. I have certain suspicions, not wholly unconnected with the above facts, which, if their truth could be proved, would undoubtedly be more than sufficient to bring about the result we both desire. What these suspicions are, I am not at present free to tell you, as everything depends on the outcome of farther inquiries, which I propose at once to set on foot. But if this new investigation is to be properly carried out, I am afraid that additional funds will be necessary. I have already laid out the greater part of the sum you entrusted to me; and, to carry on the new work proposed, I should need another hundred pounds at least. It makes, I fear, a large sum altogether; but when I tell you that what I have in my mind to do will involve a special visit to America, I am sure you will not think me extortionate. Dear Miss Petherway—my dear Rose, if you will allow me so to address you—I know your motives, so strong for good hitherto, will not now permit you to hold back when——"

Rose could read no more. Her very soul sickened.

"Liar! Sponger! Cheat!" With every word she sent a shower of paper-scraps flying on the breeze. "'My dear Rose!' How dare he!—the common swindler! He must take me for as big a fool as——" She was silent a moment, smiling bitterly, "—yes!—as big a fool as I have been!"

Her whip sang through the air. Her horse lunged forward down the green slope, breaking at once into a mad gallop under a never-ceasing storm of blows. Faster and faster she urged the willing, sturdy brute; mile after mile straight ahead, turning aside for nothing, straight over the ringing, sunburnt turf, up hill and down dale,

through gorse-brake and knee-deep heather, until at last she reined in at the top of the chalk-lane leading to the village, and let her blowing, steaming mount pick his way downward at his will. The foam about his mouth was tinged with red, and a thin trickling line of the same hue crossed his rider's own pallid lip.

"Yes! what a fool I have been!" she mused to herself, as she took the winding descent between the high green hedges. "Fool, fool! to mope and sorrow and hunger and snivel all these months—and for what? What man is worth it in the whole world?"

She turned her face full to the sun, tossing the loose bines of shining yellow hair back out of her eyes. Her laugh rang out on the wind, loud and recklessly.

"But there shall be no more of it! There is a way to forget these things, and I will find it, cost what it may. I will see life—Tom shall help me—we will go everywhere together—dear, merry old Tom shall help me to forget!"

Rose Petherway gained the village at length by the narrow bridle-path which ran between the wall of the rectory grounds and the close-clipped yew-hedge of the churchyard. The hoofs of her tired horse made scarce a sound as he stepped gingerly over the soft velvety turf of the way. Gliding along under the green leaf-shadows, Rose presently drew into range of voices. The voices came from the rectory garden, and recognising them as those of Mr. Jenyns and his housekeeper, Rose Petherway softly checked her steed. She intended to lean over the high wall and engage the rector in talk for a moment. But a word, a name, that now reached her ears, drove this harmless purpose from her mind. The hot blood rushed to her cheeks. Silently, eagerly, she bent to listen.

"You know I always have a great respect for your opinions"—it was Mr. Jenyns who spoke—"but here I think you are very likely to be wrong."

Peering through the fronds of ivy that topped the wall, Rose could make out that the two were pacing up and down on the gravel-path just below her, the trim slight form of Sabie, with her black serge arms rigidly folded, the rector reading her face anxiously, as he walked by her side.

"He is getting on for forty, and——"

"Only just thirty-six, Sabie!"

"Well, thirty-six, then, and she but nineteen. That is too great a difference, even if there were nothing else. But there is something else."

"Ah! there you go!—off on the old crooked path again! Was there ever such a woman!"

There fell a silence between them. They drew momentarily out of Rose's sight. When they reappeared the rector's hand lay upon Sabie's shoulder. Both looked on the ground as they walked.

"I believe it to be wrong, and have not changed my opinion these twenty years, as you know. Fine cloth and homespun—they come from different looms, and will never make good together. Mark my words: this will turn out another case in point."

The rector laughed. It seemed to Rose a desperate, suppressed laugh. He stopped—turned on his heel—looked away. And then his eyes slowly sought again the plain clever face of the woman beside him.

"Listen, Sabie," he cried, "and you will relent, unless you are made of stone. He has told me all—bared his whole heart to me, I think. If ever I heard a tale of true love, I heard it then. He realises all the social difficulties and pitfalls, and brushes them away like the cobwebs they are. He knows that love is a drink at the fountain-head of life; and whether the cup you dip with is made of gold or clay, matters not a jot. It is the same pure drink, from the same well everlasting. And—most

blessed thing—the woman he loves, thinks with him, or, rather, does not think at all. Oh! I am with Claud Laughton heart and soul, Sabie, my—my friend. He makes me forget I am old, and the cup I might have dipped with cracked and warped in the blast-furnace of over-righteousness. But I am going to watch them drinking together, please God! for many a year to come; and christen their children, I hope; and tell off their years of joy with them, and so comfort myself as I may."

Sabie was a long time in answering. All the while her keys jingled softly in her hand.

"Well, we shall all know some day," she said at last, moving away, he following her. "We must each act according to the lights available. To go against those must be wrong, even though the lights are false. And right only chanced upon in darkness, can never be right at all."

When the jingle of Sabie's keys had died away in the far reaches of the garden, Rose Petherway cantered off towards the farm. All the way her white lips formed the one phrase voicelessly. "Christen their children! *Their* children! Oh! my God, my God!"

"Th' gell, she be perkin' up a bit, at laast, I do believe, mother," said old Farmer Petherway, as he turned in his seat by the table after dinner, to stare fondly at the door which had just closed upon Rose.

"Ay! to be sure an' all! An' it wun't do her any hurt to see a bit more o' outside life. But, dear, dear! I dunno about Marshminster Races to-morrow, I doan't i'deed. An' wi' none but Tom, too, fer company!"

The old farmer thought a moment.

"She ha' taken a fancy to't, an' best let her go, Martha. 'Twill do her more good'n harm, as she be now. An' 'tis a fair sign, along o' her complaint—hankerin' arter

a little pleasure. But Lor'! what a time o't! Not 'aaf I doan't wish I hadn't sold that there three-quarter acre on the hillside ten year ago!"

And Rose was pacing her room with this new canker ceaselessly gnawing at her heart. To and fro she went, from one mirror to the other, and every time she stopped to survey herself, the same thought, almost the same words, rose, with a sob, in her throat.

"Their children! His and hers! Oh! I cannot bear it!—the insult and disgrace of it! A common drudge of a shop-girl to steal my happiness from me; to rob me of—of all that I most longed for in life!"

Thus a dozen times, perhaps, she stopped in her restless walk. And then, of a sudden, she flashed round to the writing-table. She drew out her cheque-book and hurriedly scribbled a draft. A moment later Miss Rose's bell was clanging in the kitchen, and as the maid breathlessly mounted the stair to answer the imperious summons, a sky-blue envelope was flung down to her.

"Tell Marks to ride with it into the town, Chapman, as fast as he can! I want it to catch the late London post!"

CHAPTER XX

THE PASSING OF THE STAR

AS the summer sped on, Claud Laughton found himself developing a habit wholly new to him. Whenever a lull came in the day's work, or at evening when, outdoor work being over, Elisabel happened to be busy in the house and averse from idle company, he would get away by himself to some odd corner of the bee-farm; and there, alone with his pipe, would settle himself deliberately to the contemplation of his present happiness—serve a sort of glad apprenticeship to the optimist's trade.

Formerly, though Claud never realised until now the iniquity and the futility of it, he used to cultivate pessimism as a social accomplishment; brood over the black side of things, nurse a cynical mood, inveigh against preventable follies, parade before himself the woes of life until he magnified out of all proportion their inferior significance as causes, and entirely lose sight of their didactic value as effects.

But all this was now over, well-nigh forgotten. Down by the bee-farm gate, in the green shade of an elder-tree, stood a barrel, which served as kennel for an ancient watch-dog whose sole office in the decline of his days was to bark at tramps. This was a favourite seat of Claud's, when the new mood was on him to count up his blessings;

and here he spent many an odd half-hour of gloaming, pipe in mouth, the retriever's shaggy head between his two hands, and his white linen legs swinging thoughtfully in and out of the barrel-mouth, as he turned over in a grateful and placid mind the various good things of the day.

Each day had its good things now: the little fishes that went to give sweetness to the moment—his wife's every word, her every laugh and smallest act, every glance he got from her eyes or passing glimpse of her near and far; and the great leviathans that swam steadily on through all the days, exuding sweetness of gargantuan, eternal kind—their mutual love and joy in their spouseship, abounding health and strength, their common delight in the beauty of the world, and the prosperity that attended all they took in hand.

Sometimes, indeed, at these contemplative moments, Claud's thoughts would not take the golden path to which he so determinedly headed them, but would stray off into dubious side-alleys where the footing was rough and the light grey.

Happy and rejuvenated as he now felt, he knew well he bore certain scars that could never be erased either by love, time, or the subtle art of the optimist. Visible as they were to himself alone, they were there, and there indelibly, and he could not always forget them. He remembered a day in his early life, just when he stood between youth and manhood, when he could have laid bare his inmost mind to the unshadowed sun, and been fearless of blame. He remembered years that followed, during which a glimmering rushlight would have revealed all too much. Sorrow, disgust, dismay at what he had trafficked in, united now to fill him with something that was near akin to real repentance. That the love he bore his wife was a pure and lasting love, he did not doubt:

that it was the first, the virgin affection of his heart, he knew as he knew that he moved and breathed. Yet what a heart to exchange for such as hers!—what wretched dross to scorse for gold! Sullied, branded with an iron, the enervation of past mad years upon it—how could he ever see it treasured, casketed where it was, without a flush of shame?

Yet these disturbing memories were few and far between. They were ugly enough while they lasted, but they soon passed; and in the sunny sparkle of Claud's life, they counted no more for darkness than black pebbles sunk fathoms deep in a sunny sparkling sea.

Though he had the clear vision on past doings that comes with years, he had also their accompanying sense of true proportion. He would have paid any price to have been able to bring to Elisabel the same pristine nature that she brought to him. But to spend himself in vain regrets would be only folly now, he argued, and argued wisely. Oblivion was the only sure foundation on which to build up such a House of Life as he now had in mind; to found it on soil still sown thick with bitter remembrances, was like building over a bed of fungi that would lift and sunder any weight; to raise it on vain regrets was to build on shifting sand. No!—he would, he must forget—wipe his life's tablets clean and start again.

All these were very early thoughts in his changed career, and, like new brooms, they did their work swiftly and well. Before many weeks had gone by he found himself marvelling at his success in what he knew to be a very difficult matter—the practical application of philosophy to the daily inconsequence of things. What with abundance of hard work, rude health, an unclouded horizon, and such a pitcher of happiness to quaff from as never before had come to his lips, the new Claud Laughton found himself

wondering at length whether the old Claud Laughton had ever really existed other than in a gruesome dream.

And very early, too, there came to him food for thought that, as time journeyed on, tended more and more to drive other aspects of his state out of these leisure moments for rumination.

It was after breakfast on a morning in late July. The day was young: the mists had not gone from the valley. But the sun was already burning with such zest and lustre as betokened a day of breathless heat in store. The General had already hurried off to his work, his last bite humping his cheek; but Claud lingered with Elisabel in the cool, spacious apartment, wherein, without greatly dimming it, the drawn amber curtains coloured and diffused the light. Elisabel was busy at the far end of the room, and Claud still sat in his seat by the breakfast-table silently watching her, as he loved to do, and listening to the rich note of the bees outside. But there was something he missed, and presently he spoke his thought aloud.

"Where is 'Clementine' this morning, Elisabel? And 'Hush thee, my Babe!'? And what has become of 'Sweet Belle Mahone'?"

He heard her low laugh mingle with the clatter of kitchen-gear with which she was employed. But she made him no other answer. He affected a roystering, cavalier-like mood.

"Sing, mistress, sing! What are you here for but to make hearts merry? What!—you refuse? Then I'll soon show you how birds who can sing and won't sing ought to be treated!"

He came over to her and gripped her by both wrists.

"Now, sing this moment! Sing 'Hush thee, my Babe!' or down you go into the deepest dungeon under the——"

"Claud! not now!"

"Sing, I tell you! I am letting you off with an easy one. Sing, or——"

"Claud!"

And at the second low utterance of his name—the appeal in her eyes—the catching of her breath, a little light came into his darkness.

"Oh, you brute! You blind, blundering idiot!" he kept silently repeating to himself as he held her head down upon his shoulder. Thus she clung to him a while, silent as he; and then she gently disengaged herself and turned to her work again.

"'Tis onlucky to—— An' I never thought when I——" Her words came low and falteringly in the rich, deep burr of South Down speech—it was curious how her old accent always returned to her in moments of deep feeling. "An' I will sing, Claud; but not now, and not that. 'Tis only to-day as I come to believe—— An' I am too glad to—to——"

Somehow he felt that he was too gross a being to breathe the same air with her at this moment, and he slowly moved away. But at the door he looked back; their eyes met. "And I am glad, too, my darling, my darling!" he cried to her huskily, and strode away to his work among the hives.

From that moment Elisabel became a new creature in all his thoughts concerning her.

If he had loved her with all the abandonment and blind devotion of his strong man's nature, as maiden and bride, now to these feelings was added something more nearly akin than ever to downright worship. He could no longer bear to have her out of his sight. He hung upon her lightest word. He was for ever scheming how to bring more ease into her life, how to afford her pleasure, how to save her from little ills and petty cares. If it

had been left to his own fashioning, he would have made of her an idle goddess, on whom the very sunbeams would have been allowed to fall but charily: the very bees had been made to fan their wings softly as they passed her, lest too rough an air disturbed her path.

Luckily for Claud and his good self-repute at this season, there were more wills than one to reckon with on Whinbury honey-farm. The old songs, all save one, again began to drift out of open door and window in the Bee-Barn; and with this resumption of her former mood, Elisabel got the old unobtrusive hand upon the helm once more. To Claud's suggestion of outside feminine help in her housework, and to his deep-laid plot to oust her from her share of the thronging labour among the hives, she made laughing, indignant refusal. Claud came imperiously to the charge to uphold his double authority as husband and bee-master. There was a sharp bout of it between them, ending in his entire discomfiture. He retired that evening to the barrel under the elder-tree, the lingering strains of "Sweet Belle Mahone" in his ears, and more devotion for Elisabel than ever in his brimming heart.

Footsteps coming from the direction of the village, roused him presently from his dreams of happy vanquishment. The old dog at his feet woke, listened, then composed himself again to slumber. Visitors had been plentiful enough at the Bee-Barn of late, and none more welcome or familiar than these who were now approaching. It was Stephen Brent and his sister. Lucy passed on to the house for her usual chat with Elisabel. Stephen came and appropriated the rear-end of the barrel. For some minutes the pair smoked on together with scarce a word exchanged.

"There was a time," observed the bee-master at length, with genial sarcasm, "when I used to think of sailor-men

as a merry lot. But dry land seems to stop their whistle. Have you been to a funeral to-day, doctor?"

Stephen pushed his peak-cap to the back of his curly head. He looked round at Claud.

"Did you hear a coach-horn going through the village this morning?" he asked, with apparent irrelevance.

"I think I did: what of it?"

"Oh, nothing! Only that young ass, Tom Petherway, has started a tandem-pair, and that was his music—and hers."

"Hers?"

"Yes; don't you know the two are always together now, flying about the country? Peavey says the village-streets are no longer safe for children to play in. And the folk using the roads for miles round are all in a panic. And it is worse, they say, when she drives."

Claud Laughton was blowing rings of idle smoke into the ruddy evening air.

"Farming will never stand it, Steve."

Stephen Brent uttered a sort of indignant groan.

"Flesh and blood will never stand it—the pace they are going. Tom, I can understand: no one expects anything else from him. But for a girl to be seen where she is seen, and frequent houses where no respectable woman ought to——"

He stopped short, removed his cap, and rumpled up his black curls in sudden savagery. But marking Claud's astonished look, he resumed his seat with a laugh of forced carelessness.

"Well, when are you taking the hives to the heather?"

This was as effective a diversion of the talk as he could well have chosen, whether he designed it or not. It reminded the bee-master of a difficulty as yet unsolved.

"They ought to go next week," Claud ruminated. "The honey-flow about here will not last much longer,

with August well begun. And the ling is already getting into prime fettle on the hills. But I am rather in a fix about it, Steve. I cannot very well leave Elisabel, and I could not think of her—— No! I must let the General go this year, I suppose."

The heather-country lay some six or seven miles to the westward of the village, amidst one of the wildest and most solitary regions of the Downs. Thither Claud had been accustomed to migrate each year about the middle of August—when, according to the ancient writers on bee-craft, the Honey-Star forsook the daylight sky—taking with him a waggonful of his most populous hives, so that he might add the famous heather-sweets to his stock of wares as a honey-merchant. This annual journey, and three or four weeks' sojourn among the purple hills, had grown to be a precious time for Claud, and he was loth to give it up. Still, it seemed the only way, and he gave the General his orders for departure on the morrow.

When, however, at dinner-time on that day, he came to announce his decision to Elisabel, Claud found himself suddenly carried off his feet by an opposing current of intention as strong as his own.

"Oh, no! You must go yourself, Claud, as you always have done. And I will go with you. I shall just love to; I have been longing for it all the time. I used to go with faather when I was ever so little! We will take the hives to the hills together, Claud, and play gipsies just as I used to do!"

At that she was up, and setting about her preparations for the trip at white-hot speed. Claud and the General exchanged glances of humorous helplessness, and again the lordly bee-master went about his business uncrestfallen, even exulting in defeat.

Twilight found the hired waggon waiting at the bee-farm gate, loaded up with a score of vague white cubes

containing imprisoned murmuring millions. The little bell-tent, and sundry boxes and baskets, were piled up behind; and, cosily ensconced amid these, sat Claud and his wife, the latter hugging a bundle, done up in a blue cotton handkerchief, out of which protruded a bottle-neck.

When the vehicle had lumbered off at last, the General stood looking after it until the flare of its lantern on the hedgerows, and the crack of the carter's whip, had died away in the night. And then he leaned upon the gate-post, to lament unrestrainedly.

"All by my loane loanesome!" he wailed. "Naun but th' ould dawg, an' her gold-sparrer, an' a pesky cat as caan't abide the sight o' me! Now why couldn't I ha' gone to Friday's Well, as Maast' Laughton warnted me to? I'd ne'er ha' been standin' here i' sorrow, wi' never a sowl—— Oh, Geeminy! but I'd ha' been jest as loanesome away from 'em on th' Hill, to be sure!"

He set to plodding up the path towards the silent house, leaving the gate to shut itself behind him. This it did, after an interval, making a hollow dreary clang in the night that accentuated his misery. Half-way through the rumbling province of hives, the General stopped to gaze at the moon, and scratch in his grey beard.

"Now, I wonder," said he thoughtfully. "Ay! I do wonder why she warnted to goo so real bad hersel'! Ut couldn't ha' naun to do wi' pore George Lindup a-comin' hoame next Sadderday?—na, na! Surelye!"

CHAPTER XXI

NIGHT AND MORNING

ALL that was visible of Stephen Brent—and that was scarce more than his glowing pipe-bowl—shook in an emphatic negative.

Lucy's hand tightened on her brother's arm. She strove to get a view of his face, as they leant together on the garden-gate in the tense summer darkness. But her dim eyes could make out no more than the red spot wagging against the eglantine. She pursued the subject further.

"But how can it all end, Stephen?—how but in trouble and ruin of heart for you? Once I could think of nothing I wished for better. But now! Oh! Stephen, it can only end in two lives lost and ruined instead of one!"

"Little sister!" The deep grave voice was unsteady now. "You do not understand. There is no going back for me at this time, even if I thought of her as you think of her. My course is set: I cannot change it: I cannot turn back. There is only one way for me, and that straight forward, no matter where it leads."

"But think what manner of woman she is becoming! Look at the life she follows, Stephen—she and this poor dissolute young man! Once I know she grieved for him, did her best to restrain and reform him. But now the only thought of each seems to be to urge the other faster

and faster on all sorts of wild extravagant ways. You must know what people are saying—all the stories that are coming in about them from Stavisham and Marshminster, and every place where——"

"Yes, I know!" he interrupted her bitterly. "Who should know better than I? For she tells me everything."

"Tells you? She speaks to you of all this?" Lucy's quiet voice shot up half an octave in horror and indignation.

"Yes; tells me, Lucy dear! Whenever we meet, she seems to take a queer sort of delight in recounting her exploits; in painting herself as black as she is able to me; in braving it all out, and making me wince if she can. The race-meetings, and all about her betting-book; and the shares she has taken with Tom in horses and coursing-dogs; and the doings at that beastly gambling club in Marshminster—oh! I draw the whole fire of it on me. No one knows the new Rose Petherway more intimately than I."

His voice, which had taken a sorrowing, cynical tone, now changed suddenly. It fell to a quiet earnestness.

"And why is all this poured into my ears? Lucy, do you not begin to see what I am doing? Do you not see the grain of hope in it all? If Rose treats me in that way, she must have a reason. She would not trouble herself to stab, where she could not make a wound. And I have left her in no doubt that she hurts me, nor of the reason for it. I will not let her crowd me out of her life, and that she is at last beginning to realise. She calls me the bull-dog, and it is a bull-dog grip I have designedly fastened on her. I never miss a chance of saying my say about her doings, and she never misses one of trying to discourage and disgust me into leaving her alone. But that I will never do, and she knows it

well enough by this time. Lucy, do you not see now where the hope comes in?"

Lucy Brent came nearer to being angry with him than she had ever been in her life before.

"Hope? A pretty sort of hope indeed! You to spend your time throwing your best at her feet, just for her to trample on, and pass by on her wicked way! You to suffer for her, tear out your heartstrings trying to influence her; and she but to laugh at you and despise you for it! And the greatest good that can come of it all—that in an evil moment she may take you and marry you, only to drag you down to her level, and to the same final ruin! Stephen, your precious hope is my unutterable dread!"

He let her go on until fortitude and breath alike failed her. He knew she was crying quietly to herself, as presently he put his great arm round her and drew her to him.

"Yes, it is true, Lucy," he said. "I would marry her to-morrow, if she would have me. I am not afraid. I am sure of my own love for her, and believe in the power of that alone to save us both from harm, if ever the thing I want should come about. But I may have more than love to trust in. At least, if only—— Lucy, it all flashed up clear as day to me when Claud Laughton was talking just before the wedding. He gave me a great idea. And if I could only carry it out——!"

He was silent a while, leaning upon the gate-post and thoughtfully filling his pipe.

"The worst of it is I have got such poor stuff to work upon," he went on at last, hesitantly, as though he were trying to make some intricate thing plain to himself as well as to her. "It is the silk purse and the sow's ear over again, I am afraid. But—but——"

He stopped to fumble for his matches.

"Lucy, you know Elisabel better than anyone, perhaps. You know what the undercurrent of her nature is—her beautiful pure spirit, and deep feeling, and—and you know where she gets it all from. Well, all that seems to have frightened Claud at first, then literally to have made a new man of him. I hardly know him now, though I love him more and more with every day. Now, if I—— Lucy, don't you see where the hope comes in at last? If I could by any means, by any striving and sacrifice and self-discipline, so change my own nature that—— Oh! my dear sister! if only that miracle could be brought about in me, there would be nothing I could not accomplish, nothing I should fear!"

He had struck the match at last, and in its sudden yellow spurt of flame, Lucy saw his face wondrously transfigured. She waited until the light had gone, and there was once more nothing but the little red spot in the darkness, and then she put out warm trembling hands to him.

"Yes, I have seen it, Stephen, and I have wondered so! Yes, yes! I can see where the hope comes in! Who knows but it may all turn out so at last?"

No word more was said on this subject between them, and the two stood for a long time gazing out over the shadowy green with its darker shadows of tree-clumps, where the night-jars were making their high, weird melody like the whirr of spinning-wheels. At length Lucy uttered an exclamation.

"Hark!" she cried. "There is someone running up the street! Whoever would think of running in Whinbury? and so late, too!"

They gave ear together. Though the sound was still far off, it was easy to tell that the runner was in a tremendous hurry. The noise of his passage rapidly increased. Soon the clatter of hob-nail boots was echoing

among the houses on the opposite side of the green. And then the clatter changed to a thudding note. Stephen started.

"Whoever it is, he is coming straight over here!" he said. "And coming at breakneck speed. It sounds like——"

"Hi, hi! Doctor! Doctor Brent!"

Though he had still some fifty yards of ground to cover, the runner had commenced to shout as lustily as his scanty breath would permit. The next moment he had precipitated himself into Stephen's arms in the darkness.

"Oh! 'tis his own self!—thank the Lord! 'Tis you, doctor, bean't it? Sech a to-do! Come to th' faarm, doctor, quick as you can! 'Tis Maast' Tom, sir, as be took mortal mad in his 'ed, sir! Clane crazed, 'a be; an' naun but Miss Rose along wi' 'un! Lor'! ye never heerd sech a shanty! Ravin' an' tornadin' an'——"

Stephen waited to hear no more. With one bound he was in the house crowding certain articles from his medicine-chest into his pockets. A few seconds later, after a hurried word to Lucy, he was off at full speed in the direction of the farm.

"I knew it! I knew it would come!" he muttered to himself, as he pounded along in the darkness. "Well, it will put a dead stop to a lot of things, and so may turn out a blessing in the end."

If Stephen had been in any doubt of what ailed Tom Petherway, he had speedy confirmation on reaching the great white gate of the farm. The house-door stood open, and just within it was huddled a little knot of women, the servants of the house, in every kind of improvised attire, and all simmering with excitement. His first sharp inquiry produced a babel of response.

"Maaster an' mistus be away, sir, on a 'ollerday!"

"'A come hoame, an' 'a went to bed, Maast' Tom did,

sir! An' then we all heerd sech a din an' outcry in the night as never was!"

"An' his door be locked, sir, an' no one caan't make him attend!"

"An' Miss Rose——"

"Where is Miss Rose, then?"

"She be talkin' to 'un through th' door, sir; tryin' to get 'un to open, an'——"

That was enough for Stephen. He took the stairs three at a time, and, guided by the tumult above, found himself the next moment face to face with Rose Petherway. She had evidently heard his arrival, and was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, a candle held high over her head.

Even at such a crucial moment, Stephen could not resist one look and one thought given up entirely to her. Obviously she had been brought straight from her bed. She had hastily thrown a blue silk dressing-gown over the embroidered cambric of her night-gear; and from beneath the frilled edge of the gown her pretty feet shone out. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders, glittering like spun gold in the candle-light. Her cheeks flamed. And the laugh with which she greeted him, was like the tinkling fall of icicles in a winter wind.

"Listen, doctor!" was all she said. And again that slow freezing music came to mingle with the hubbub and outcry from within. Stephen Brent stood stock-still for a moment, and then he pulled off his coat. "Stand out of the way!" said he.

At the first lunge of his powerful shoulders, the door shivered and creaked, but still held; at the second, it gave way. And as it crashed back on its hinges, Stephen had just time to note that the room was in darkness, when a pistol-shot rang out, followed by another and another, the bullets shrilling past his ear and burying themselves in the wall behind.

Almost at the same instant a figure sprang raving out of the gloom. Rose saw Stephen close with it; there was a moment's wild mêlée, then the crash of the two men falling. And then Stephen was kneeling up by a silent, motionless form.

"I could not help it, Rose!" he panted. "He fell undermost, and has struck his head. But he is only stunned. Take the light in there, and then help me to carry him to his bed."

As Stephen had predicted, Tom Petherway was none the worse for his fall; rather the better, in fact. The fierce struggle, and the violent shaking he had undergone, had exhausted him physically; and, on regaining consciousness, he lay quite still except for an incessant rolling of his head upon the pillow. Mentally, however, he continued in desperate case. Unendingly his tongue poured out an incoherent jumble of words. He laughed, shouted. Terror, wrath, defiance, a horrible weak kind of jollity, by turn and turn possessed him. Or he would close his staring eyes, and fall to a pitiful moaning as he rocked his head unceasingly to and fro.

Stephen had bent over him but a few moments before making up his mind on the necessary treatment of the case.

"Get my coat, Rose, from outside, will you?" he said. "I must keep close by him, in case his violent mood returns. Now feel in the pocket for a little green bottle, and empty it into that tumbler of water. That's right. And now be ready to help me if he resists."

But poor Tom Petherway was the last man to take offence at the cold rim of a goblet to his lips. He drank the draught down greedily. In a few minutes Stephen was overjoyed to mark the subsidence of his mental distress. A little later he lay sunk in a lethargy of dream-haunted sleep.

And then, for the first time since he had met her frozen mirth with his look of reproach and love, Stephen stole a glance at his silent companion. A cry escaped his lips.

"Rose! you are hurt! Your sleeve is soaked with blood!"

She looked down at the dark stain on her clothing with a contemptuous indifference.

"What does it matter?—it is nothing. Don't bother about it now. Rather disgraceful—don't you think, doctor?—for a good shot like Tom to try for the brace and miss one and only wing the other!"

But Stephen had borne down upon her resolutely, with his hands full of bandages and lint.

"Let me look at it, Rose! Pull up your sleeve; quick now! You should have told me before!"

She faced him a moment as though she would defy him to touch her. But then she seemed to relent, yielding to a whim to humour him. She loosened her gown at the neck, and slowly drew her beautiful white shoulder and arm out of the sleeve until the gash made by the passing bullet came into view. As he dressed the wound and bandaged it, she watched him, her big grey eyes full of indifference and quiet amusement.

"A doctor's hand ought not to shake so, Stephen," she said drily. "But perhaps you are getting a little out of practice. Isn't it time you went off again to sea?"

He made no reply to this, but gently helped her to get the bandaged arm into its sleeve again. This done, he walked to the bedside, and considered a moment.

"Rose," he said, "he will need constant watching throughout the night, and perhaps for many days and nights to come. No one can say yet what course his trouble will take. I will stay by him until the morning, when the worst will be over and we shall know fairly well

what to expect. But you must rest. Go back to your room now, and sleep if you can. I will call you if anything unfavourable sets in."

She was lounging over the bed-foot. She turned to him with a look of supercilious languor.

"Is it likely to be so serious, then?" she asked. And at that, and the pretty white hand carelessly raised to mask a yawn, his patience fairly broke down.

"Serious? He is in the greatest danger! For days to come his life may hang upon a thread! Even if he pulls through, he may never get up from his bed again. Oh, Rose! are you lost to all feeling? Have you no grief for what is in a great measure your own doing, or at least what was clearly in your power to prevent?"

He turned from her in almost ungovernable anger, well-nigh with disgust. He heard her quick tread come up impetuously behind him; but it stopped, hesitated, receded. And presently the soft closing of the door told him that he was alone with the senseless, stertorously breathing man.

For hours Stephen Brent sat by the bedside, watching the pale, bedewed face on the pillow, but Tom Petherway neither moved nor woke. A period of utter exhaustion seemed to have set in. The effect of the composing draught should have passed away by now, as Stephen well knew; and though he had said nothing of it to Rose, he had fully expected an early renewal of the delirious symptoms. Yet nothing of the kind occurred. The night dragged through. The dawn began to show livid white behind the window-curtains. But Tom Petherway drowsed on, breathing heavy and slow, his face as colourless as the pillow on which it rested. Stephen lifted the hand from the coverlid: it fell back like a hand of the dead. He began to get a little puzzled.

"The pulse of a baby," Stephen mused, "and not half a baby's strength. He will never get through another turn like this, even if——"

He stopped; for the sick man was suddenly broad awake, his haggard wondering eyes riveted on the face above him. His lips moved, and Stephen bent to listen.

"I know, old man!—I—I have got my billet—keep it dark, won't you, Steve—but—but this is jimjam number two!"

A faint rustle sounded at Stephen's elbow. He turned. Rose Petherway stood by his side: how long she had been there he did not know, so noiseless had been her entrance into the room. But her first words resolved the point.

"It is what I suspected all along," she whispered, drawing him aside. "It must have been when he stopped away all that time at Whittlesea. Well, doctor; the play is in your hands now. If anything can be done to pull him through, you are the man to do it. Why do you look at me like that? Oh! I believe in you fast enough—if that is what surprises you!"

Stephen Brent had indeed been looking at her wonderingly, but he had wondered almost more at her appearance than her words. Long hours of bitter weeping could alone account for what he marked in her then. His stern eyes softened, rekindled with the old patient, faithful fire she knew so well.

"Yes, something can be done," he whispered. "See! he is asleep again, and sleep now is better for him than all else. But when he awakes, we must get to work with a will; draw him inch by inch away from the danger-zone, and perhaps——"

"Perhaps?" she questioned, as he paused.

"Rose! it would be only cruelty to deceive you!

He may live ; and that is the best we dare hope for. He can never rise from his bed again."

A little later she took him down through the silent, sleeping house, and stood with him a moment under the door-porch in the stealthy grey of the morning. The robins made a plaintive music in the shrubbery of the garden, and above them the martins were chattering merrily about the eaves.

" I will be back in an hour with the draughts and things," he told her, " and will stay by him all to-day, and every night until he is past the critical point. But I must have some reliable person to help me in the day-time. Is there some woman here who can be trusted to do exactly what she is told ? "

She answered him slowly, her wan eyes looking straight into his.

" Yes—there is a woman here. And she can be trusted —that is if anyone will trust her now." She paused. He saw the beautiful grey eyes fill under their drooping, golden-fringed lids. " Oh ! Stephen, I am not really the hard, bad woman I seem to you ! My mad time is over —I have had a lesson ! Wait and see ! "

CHAPTER XXII

AMONG THE HEATHER

FRIDAY'S WELL, near the top of the great combe where the ling, the true honey-heather, grew so abundantly, was a little pool, or water-hole, in the heart of a thicket of furze and ancient thorns.

Claud Laughton had brought his bees to the heather for many an autumn past before he realised the origin of the name. He had often come to the dusky green hollow where the pool lay hidden, to dip his bucket in its crystal depths; and as many times he had wondered what Friday could have to do with it, any more than other days of the week.

Once, when he had let his bucket slip from his grasp, and had been at great pains to recover it, he had fished up from the soft ooze at the bottom a curious object—a shapeless twisted mass of bronze, of utility inconceivable. This he had kept upon a shelf at home for many years, until recently, showing it to Mr. Jenyns, the mystery about Friday's Well stood revealed. Friday meant Freya, he learned—Freya, the goddess of health in old mythological times; and this must have been the magic well where the halt and lame and stricken of pestilence came to wash and be cleansed; casting thereafter, as tokens of gratitude to the deity, various articles of value into the pool.

All this, and much more that he had learned from the rector, Claud recounted to Elisabel, as the waggon lumbered and swayed and creaked along under the moonlit night.

Their progress was slow, not only on account of the difficulties of the way, but because the excitable cargo they carried, needed the utmost care and vigilance in transit. Yet once up the steep lane giving upon Whinbury Down, and the wheels silently running on the soft turf of the uplands, their deliberate course had little of monotony in it. The two nestled close together in their nook among the baskets and boxes, Claud with his arm fast round Elisabel, and she hugging her bundle, while she chatted on like a happy schoolgirl off for the holidays.

"Where shall we put the hives, Claud?" she presently asked him, her mind harking back at last to the project in hand. "Faather, he always pitched on the north side of the combe, so that they might get the whole day's sun upon them. And so did all the other folk with bees."

"And so they do still, Elisabel; and they are wrong, my dearie."

Though time had weeded out most youthful vanities from Claud's nature, he took a frank delight in losing no chance of improving her opinion of him as an adept in his craft.

"They are all wrong in that," he said confidently. "We shall go to the western end, close to the Well, and so catch the very first beam of morning sun that shines up the combe. It is the nights that fill the heather-flowers with sweetness. If I knew how to make bees work in the dark, I would have it so up here. But they will never do that; so the next best thing I can contrive is to wake them up as early as possible in the mornings. Do you not see the idea, Elisabel? Why, our hives will be roused by the sunshine, and a good part of their day's work done,

long before a bee has stirred on the grey northern slope."

This evidence of her bee-master's astuteness could not add to Elisabel's faith in and admiration for him, because these were already perfect and complete. But it set her thoughts in a new direction.

"Then what a lot of honey must be lost in the world," she said, after a pause, "if such little things make so much difference. Oh! I am so glad you made me learn the better ways."

His answer was remote from what she expected.

"I am not glad at all, mavourneen! I am very sorry, and I grow sorrier every day. Yet I cannot help it. We have our living to get from bees, and must get it in the only possible way. But it is not the better way—very far from it. Ever since I saw you among your old straw skeps, I have grown to love them—to know what real use there is in beauty such as theirs. And perhaps some day, when we need no longer trouble about money, we will——"

He did not finish his sentence. While they had been talking, time had crept insensibly by, and they were drawing near to their destination. Claud pointed across the upland to a dark zone reared against the starry horizon.

"There are Thornrick beeches already! Why, we shall be in Friday's Combe in no time now! Come! let us walk the rest of the way."

The waggoner stopped to skid his wheel, for a steep declivity had here to be negotiated. Claud and Elisabel seized the opportunity to alight, and were soon trudging forward over the turf that was like frosted silver from the combined moonlight and dew—every step they took threw a shower of dusky sparkles ahead of them on the descending way.

Hand in hand they went, leaving the cautious waggoner

far behind. Elisabel's bundle clinked over Claud's shoulder, and she walked a little in front of him, her joyous young face tilted up to the sky, one of the old songs just trembling upon her lips, like some memory dimly recalled. Presently he fell to humming with her, and at that the music gathered sudden impetus. Soon all the sweetness of her fresh, childlike voice, and the rich, sonorous depth of his baritone, were waking a thousand echoes in the waste of hills. Thus they made their first entry together into the mouth of the great shadowy combe, whose farther end was closed by the furze and thorn copse, and here they ended their song.

While they stood waiting for the waggon to overtake them, Claud surveyed the prospect ahead.

"One—two—three—four lights!" he counted slowly. "That will be old Budger from Redesdown, and the long brothers from Westergate, and Harker from Stoke, for certain; and we'll soon find out who the other is. No one at the west end, as usual; so we shall have it all to ourselves. Go on, Searle! straight through, and pitch on the old spot."

Friday's Combe measured a good half-mile in length, and it was some time before the waggon drew to a halt at the edge of the furze-copse. But Claud's advent had been early marked. As the new arrivals threaded their way along the moonlit bottom of the combe, shrill whistles and halloos came down to them from the camps on the hillside. The waggon had scarcely drawn to rest, before footsteps were heard crashing through the undergrowth towards them. Half a dozen men surrounded Claud and Elisabel, and there followed such a hand-gripping and hubbub from welcoming tongues as can be met with only among beemen at the heather.

Old Budger kept Elisabel's hand fast in his own, while he held his lantern high above her head.

"Who'd ha' thought it!" he roared affectionately. "If only I'd ha' knowed when I bought they skeps off of ye laast Fair time at Stavisham, wudn't we all ha' christened the day—not 'aaf!"

"No one knew it then, Mr. Budger," returned Claud, as he stripped off his coat, preparatory to the work of unloading. "No one had even thought of it but myself, and—the Star!"

With so many friendly hands available, it was not long before the hives had been brought from the waggon and arranged in a wide semicircle, with their faces pointing towards the combe. Behind these, in a little grassy bay on the edge of the furze-thicket, they put up the tent, and soon got all the new-comers' property safely within it, out of reach of the dew. One man appeared with an armful of brushwood, and speedily had a fire blazing for them by the tent-door. Another had arrived with a stone bottle of good liquor; still another bore a billy-can that gave forth a savoury steam as it was presented to Elisabel. Within half an hour the waggon had disappeared in the moonlit dusk on its way back to Whinbury, the heather-campers had one by one returned to their own quarters, and Claud and Elisabel stood alone by their tent-door, looking out upon the night.

"Hark at the peewits calling!" he said to her, as he drew her to him. "And the dor-beetles droning! And look at the white moths fluttering everywhere! And smell the heather!—it is like a draught of wine. Oh! we shall be very happy here, Elisabel!—happier than ever we have been. I think if it were given me to choose my own Hereafter, provided I ever come to deserve a happy one, I would choose to be always at the heather with my bees—and you."

Claud Laughton had not so vastly overrated the life that was now in store for them.

Even in that famous year so prodigal of sunshine, the time that followed was recalled to mind for the unleavened cloudless calm of its days, and its nights of serene beauty. Every morning began for them in the same way. The first beam of sun that struck through the canvas of their little tent, sent Claud striding barefoot over the dew-soaked grass to dip his bucket in Friday's Well. Returning, he would find a shaft of blue smoke curling up above the tent like a feather in a lady's hat, and Elisabel kneeling by the great fire of sticks she had kindled, busily engaged in preparations for the morning meal. Soon the kettle would commence to sing and the bacon-rashers to splutter and writhe in the pan. Out would come the little folding-table, and the soap-boxes that served for chairs. In a moment a white cloth hid the board, and various necessaries for the meal appeared upon it. By the time Claud had finished towelling himself, and Elisabel, sitting in the tent-door before a pendant scrap of mirror, had transferred the last hairpin from her red lips to its place in her turban of dark tresses, the kettle was bubbling furiously, and nothing remained but to draw up for the meal.

This would be about five o'clock in the morning, never much later through all the weeks they spent at the heather. Breakfast being disposed of, there came to each the realisation of a fact—one which, to the last day of their sojourn among the hills, lost scarce anything of its refreshing novelty. This was the truth that little or no work lay before them throughout the long day. It was a real holiday, this taking the hives to the heather. Beyond the task of exchanging the full honey-chambers for empty ones every few days, there was really nothing to do but lounge in the sunshine, smoke or read or talk in shady corners, or go for long delicious rambles over purple hill and dale.

To Claud, who, though he never shirked work, had

little natural instinct for it, this idle spirit which had come over their lives, was a perennially blessed thing. He accepted his new state as a child accepts a Christmas-tree or a pantomime—so much glory given, to be unquestioningly taken at the moment or lost for ever.

To Elisabel, however, trained in a harder, narrower school, there seemed at first something unnatural, even iniquitous, in spending time thus unproductively. For all her real acumen, and reflective, deductive temperament, she could not easily reconcile the fact of her idle hands with the old inherited peasant distrust of daylight leisure. To stop working when she was tired out at the end of a day—that seemed in the order of things, and gave her no uneasiness. But to lie in the sunshine in full energy of body and mind, to eat and drink without the price of immediate labour, to come at last to lie down at night and take sleep as a mere interval between one day of happy sloth and another—that brought her many heart-searchings, many unquiet reflections, even when Claud judged her to be accepting the good time unquestioningly as a lark accepts a blue summer sky.

Rousing one night, when the glow of the harvest moon filtered through the canvas of their little tent, flooding it with pale golden light, Claud saw that she was awake, and sitting erect by his side, looking more like a spirit than a woman, her great eyes turned upon him;—what else had brought him from his dreams, if not this intense, earnest gaze of hers, he could not tell. But when she saw that he no longer slept, she slowly bent and kissed him, and then he knew.

"My husband!" she said again and again, and sobbingly poured her thoughts and her doubts into his ear. "I have you—you! And I am so happy that I could cry all day long about it. And we have not a want in the world: we are both well, and have all the food and clothing

we need, and more money than we can ever find a use for. But oh, my darling! how am I to make up for it all? How can I justify it to others, who are in such need in the world? Why is so much given to me, while I let day after day go by just idly revelling in and wasting it all, like a heifer strayed into the corn? Oh! I am afraid that suddenly it will be all taken from me, because I am using it so selfishly, and doing so little to deserve it. I am always thinking of my happiness as if it would be a part of my life for ever, and not as something I hold in trust, to be given back sevenfold in joy made for others, or in seven times sevenfold sorrow and pain of my own."

Claud put up a hand to touch her cheek, as though to assure himself that it was a woman, and not an angel beside him. He laughed a low, superb laugh, that had in it all the most devout prayer could have expressed.

"Did we make ourselves, Elisabel?—did we make our own state, and the world we are set to joy and labour and sorrow in?"

"No," she answered doubtfully. "At least sometimes I think we do really——"

"Dear heart! what we consciously do to that end counts for nothing at all. Do not you see that we are as much in the hand of the Infinite as a straw upon a stream? That is life—it is a great river on which we are all afloat. By striving and contriving we can draw a little nearer to the retarding banks, or work into cross-eddies, or even perhaps sink ourselves into the mud below. But so long as we keep ourselves in the best of the current, no more can be asked of us, because we are given no fuller power. Oh! there is no chance in God's world, my Elisabel! Our progress is the river's progress, and our goal the river's goal; both preordained and sure. Joy is the sunshine, and labour and sorrow are the shadows, across the river's way. We pass through these,

and cannot avoid them, so long as we float. They do not come to us: they are there, waiting on the path; and the fact that they seem to come and go, only proves our real progress. My dear, my dear! we are driving on now through a fine long stretch of sunshine: take your fill of it unreckingly while it lasts!"

Thus Gentleman-Laughton to the peasant-girl whom he had made his wife—he, once the hard-bitten Londoner, trained to a hair's-breadth in the ways of a world that has turned its green grass into paving-stones and blinkered its passions and ideals with gold.

When the dawn came, he left her sleeping, and stole out into the grey pure light to think upon her words and his own. This constantly returning thought of Elisabel's—her belief that joy was sold to men for a price, and not given to them freely, unconditionally, by Him who made men in His own image—troubled Laughton to the core. If it were true, if some day he would be called upon inevitably to pay for all that the last few months had brought him, he was lost beyond repair, beggared and bankrupt to the last farthing of hope. To pay for Elisabel's love and all the joy he had got from it!—he could think of only one price that could requite it, and that her eternal loss.

He set himself to the steep hillside, going at ding-dong pace until he gained the summit, whence there was a magnificent view over the Weald to the north.

Half a county lay beneath him, a vast spreading plain of meadow and cornland, with Whinbourne river winding through it, and the night-mists still hovering here and there. A wisp of morning breeze struck cool upon his face. Far below him there sounded a shrill faint jangle, ever strengthening as a flock of sheep climbed the steep pass to the Hill. Claud threw himself upon his back on the parched turf and, looking upward, tried to count the larks in the sky.

"No; I am right, and she is wrong," he said to himself at last, sitting suddenly bolt upright. "There is such a thing as being too unworldly wise, and here we have it. The happiest being is the one who can be happy heedlessly, without a thought of whence happiness came or wherefore. And so it shall be with my dear love and I."

From that moment Claud Laughton strove, both literally and figuratively, to lead Elisabel into the sunshine whenever the grey mood beset her. The faculty of noble idling, the keeping of a quiet conscience through continuous leisure, he now saw, was not an inborn native thing, but a product of social art—a garment which use alone could make as second nature; and such a garment he was resolved Elisabel should wear, so long as they stayed on the hills.

Except for the brief time devoted to work among the hives, Claud frankly and undisguisedly opposed all her little schemes for useful employment. Every morning he bore her off to some new point of interest within a daylight march; and she must go empty-handed: the flash of knitting-needles in the sunshine he professed to abhor. He would hear of no task heavier than posy-plucking, and that but incidentally. He was for ever tempting her to the old laughing gaiety. The moment she ceased to smile, she saw a glum shadow sweep across his face.

She got at last to realise that he was never really content unless she was idle, careless, merry; swinging hands with him as they wandered over the heather, or rattling on blithely as she sat by his side in some nook of the rose-red hills, with her hands in her lap. And so he won his way at last; met and parried all her remonstrances; silenced her batteries; made a glad and willing prisoner of her in the end.

"Now I am happier than ever," she said to him one

day, as they trudged homeward to the bee-camp, "and I don't want to cry about it. And there is all the needle-work I brought with me to do, lying at home untouched just as I packed it weeks ago; and I am not a bit sorry. Work!—I hate work, for now I see it only takes you from me, and me from you."

Weeks ago! Claud had to ponder this, at first incredulously. Yes; it was true enough, though their coming to the heather had seemed but a thing of yesterday. While they had been dreaming, time had been flying at the old pace. August had gone, and he had never marked its passage. September was gliding by with the same swift, silent step, and he was yet thinking of heather-time as something still stretching immeasurably ahead. With a rude shock, Claud Laughton came down from his pinnacle of happy oblivion. A vacant space on the hill-side, that met his eye as they turned into Friday's Combe that evening, gave him another earthquake tremor.

"Why, Harker has packed up and gone, Elisabel!" he cried, standing stock-still. "And there is old Budger's yellow waggon loading up! The honey-flow has failed at last, and we must soon be thinking of going too."

But to break the spell of those happy days among the heather, was not so easy. Claud knew something of the difficulty of it from past experience. It had always been a hard thing to him, even when he was alone; but it was harder still this time, when Adam had his Eve, and to forsake Friday's Combe was like forsaking Eden. And so the last heather-camper disappeared. The golden days sped on. The hills began to lose their rosy tinge, and glowed now with fiery meaning under the mild autumnal light. And still Claud and Elisabel tarried on. Every day, when the shepherd's boy—who had been both messenger and purveyor to them in their solitude—came by with his flock, the same resolve was made.

"We send word to the General to-day, Elisabel," Claud would decide as the figure hove into view. "And to-morrow we will get ready for the waggon."

But though each time the boy had messages both to give and receive, this ruthless marching-order was always withheld at the last moment.

"One more day!" Elisabel would plead, to Claud's ineffable relief. "Look how beautiful it all is, and how happy the bees are with nothing to do at last! Just one more day, and then we will all go home, to work harder than ever."

At length a time came when Claud Laughton must screw his moral courage to the sticking point.

"Do you know what to-morrow is?" he said to Elisabel, as they sat together after breakfast one morning, watching the sun drive the last remnants of mist from the deserted combe. "To-morrow will be October; we ought to have been back at the bee-farm weeks ago. The General will be at his wit's end with all the syrup to make for feeding, and all the winter packing-down to do. So no word more of delay, mistress: to-morrow we must strike camp and go."

And to-morrow's gloaming saw the waggon lumbering off down the combe, piled high with its murmuring hives and heavy crates of honey, and bearing its pair of tail-board passengers as before. The night fell dark, and, for the first time in many weeks, a shrill air sang in the grass-bents around them; tatters of cloud fled across the stars. Claud snuffed the breeze prophetically.

"A change coming," he said. "The drought is going to break at last. Well, once I have got my cargo safely unloaded, Noah's Flood may fall again, for all I care. But what a harvest, Elisabel! Listen to the waggon groaning; why, the horses can hardly pull it along!"

At last, the lights of Whinbury—seen in the outset

but as a pale blur in the darkness far below; and then as separate twinkling points, growing ever nearer and nearer; and finally as candles in many cottage-windows, the glow from the forge, the hanging brass lamp in the village-shop. As the waggon rumbled through the high-street and past this latter source of superior illumination, Elisabel's hand pressed upon her husband's arm.

"Did you see who it was standing by the shop-door?" she asked.

"Yes; what of it?"

His tone made her glance round at him wonderingly.

"Oh, nothing! But I thought her face turned dark and angry when you laughed out so loud, and she looked up and saw us. Perhaps there was something that annoyed her in the letter she was reading by the light from the shop."

"The first drop of rain!"

Claud spoke with a vehemence and a haste that surprised Elisabel. He was holding his hand out beyond the waggon-tilt. "The first drop for months, I verily believe, and there is plenty more to come, by the look of the sky. See how black it is over there! Well, five minutes more, dearie, and two happy people will be safe and dry in the happiest home in all the land!"

But it was no letter that Rose Petherway stood reading in the light that streamed from sub-postmaster Peavey's door. It was a telegram; and when the bee-waggon had passed on, she turned to it afresh with a new eagerness and heightened colour:

"Success beyond all expectation. Meet me four o'clock to-morrow afternoon 'Royal Oak,' Stavisham. Vitally important. Do not fail.—COURTENAY ROPER."

CHAPTER XXIII

ROSA VICTRIX

STAVISHAM on highdays and holidays was as bustling and pleasant a little South of England market-town as one could desire; but Stavisham on an ordinary afternoon, and that of a dismal, sloppy day in October, presented a widely different aspect.

The drought had broken at last, and a night of sousing rain had apparently swept the sun and the whole blue sky away into another cosmos. It was true the deluge no longer thudded down upon the roof-tops: scarce a drop now fell from the leaden sky. But earth and heaven alike seemed utterly waterlogged. The whole town looked as though it had but just emerged from the deep sea. The sodden roofs and house-walls, every window-sill and eave and lintel, dripped unceasing moisture. Gutter-pipes splashed across the miry pavements, and all the kennels were turned into mimic watercourses. The cobbled streets and market-place mirrored the forms of the passers-by as they picked their way gingerly along. And overhead a pall of sombre sky lowered down, so over-burdened, slung apparently such a little way above the house-tops, that it seemed but a shout, or the reverberation from a heavier wheel on the stones, must bring it whelming, drowning down.

As Rose Petherway drew slowly into the precincts of

the town, letting her horse choose its own pace, she thought she had never known the place so stagnant and deserted.

The few pedestrians who were abroad, slunk along in a furtive, melancholy way. Horses splashed through the puddly streets with heads down. The drenched pigeons clustering on the façade of the church, had not a croon among them. Even the sparrows in the market-place, though they contended as noisily as ever, displayed none of their usual dash and bravado; it might have been the funeral-day of poor Cock Robin, when, even for town sparrows, highway robbery with violence had lost its zest.

Rose Petherway left her horse at the "Golden Fleece," and after hesitating a moment, turned into a narrow side-street which led towards the lower regions of the town.

As she went, holding her dark-green habit well up out of the mud, she kept her eyes lowered, and thoughtfully beat her riding-whip across her knee at every deliberate step. The "Royal Oak" mentioned in Roper's telegram, lay at the bottom of the lane, in the shiest, most dubious quarter of Stavisham; and Rose, little pleased at the choice of such a place for an appointment, had been, and still was, in two minds as to the propriety of keeping it. But the tone of the message had roused her keenest curiosity, if nothing more. At the last moment—after a peep into her brother's room where Stephen Brent sat reading to the white-visaged, prostrate man—she had ordered her horse, and ridden off without a word to anyone as to her destination. "It is only more humbug and deceit!" she laughed bitterly to herself, as she galloped through the flying mud and dripping foliage of the way. "But it will pass the time. To-day I will amuse myself a little, and then rid myself of him for ever."

Narrow and secret as the lane was, it was not narrow and secret enough for the "Oak," as its flash frequenters always spoke of it. The solemn old inn crouched some way back from the thoroughfare, hiding behind a pump, a horse-trough, and a row of lime-trees that were already shedding yellow leaves upon the sloppy gravel of the yard. Rose passed and repassed the inn several times before she finally pushed the swing-door back, and entered. She found herself in a dark passage, confronting a woman bearing a tea-tray.

"Will you tell Mr. Courtenay Roper someone wishes to see him," Rose said stiffly.

The woman looked the veiled lady up and down in the dim light.

"*Mr.* Roper, did ye say?" she asked, with emphasis on the word.

"I said so."

"Oh! I thought belike—— Well, if 'tis the gentleman ye want, I'm going up to him now. Bide here a minnit, will ye? an'——"

A rasping voice sounded from the top of the stair.

"Is it Miss Green to see me? Show the lady up at once, please. How do you do, Miss Green!"

Roper's bony hand had closed upon Rose's glove, and the next moment she found herself drawn into a room, and the door closed behind her.

"My dear Miss Petherway!" He still kept fast hold of the hand, his admiring eyes upon her, his white teeth bared in an extravagant smile. "My dear Miss Petherway! how very kind and self-denying of you to come! And in such wretched weather, too! Well, I can promise you your trouble shall not be wasted. I——"

He was bringing a chair forward, when she stopped him.

"Thank you, no! I can stay only a few moments;

so say what there is to say as briefly as you can. You offend me with your false names, and hole-and-corner meeting-places."

At that unexpected rebuff, his smile faded. He fell to biting his lip a moment. And then he turned aside with a shrug of his gaunt shoulders.

"Is it possible!" he said, as though to himself, "can it be that I have been spending time and energy like water all these months in what I conceived to be your service; and now—now——!"

Rose surveyed the face before her with its look of over-done disappointment, and laughed. She sank negligently into the chair, throwing back her veil.

"Now, Mr. Roper, let us have no melodramatic nonsense! I got your telegram in which you used the words 'success beyond all expectation.' That sounded rather interesting, especially for a dull afternoon. So I have come to hear what new rigmarole you have managed to furbish up. But I want you clearly to understand that, after to-day, I do not intend to trouble myself any more in this miserable business. I am sick of it, and—and——"

She was going to say "sick of you, too." But something in his glance stopped her. He had resumed all his old dynamic self-assurance, and was looking at her, slowly shaking his head.

"Oh, my dear Miss Petherway! how much better I know you than you know yourself! And how little you know me! From the first I realised by what an amazingly strong sense of duty you were governed, or I would never have undertaken the task which I have now brought to so successful an end. Believe me, it cannot give you more pain to hear what I am about to disclose, than I myself feel in telling it; and I would gladly save both of us that pain, if my sense of honour

and right allowed. But it cannot be. Whatever our private feelings may dictate, we are both now bound by our duty—I as much as you."

Rose lolled back in her chair, looking at him with indolent contempt.

"Indeed? But perhaps, when I tell you that I cannot possibly spare another farthing——"

"Oh, Miss Petherway!" He heaved a reproachful sigh. "Nothing—nothing was farther from my thoughts! How bitter it is to be so misunderstood by one for whom I bear such deep—— But forgive me! I know I must not speak to you so—not yet, at least."

He passed his hand dramatically over his brow. And then, as if nerving himself to some gruesome, yet inevitable task, he faced the scornful beauty before him.

"Miss Petherway," he said, slowly and impressively. "I spoke of our joint duty. I speak of it now. And the duty that lies before us is to punish, or at least to drive outside the pale of decent society, a criminal of the deepest, most despicable kind—a vile betrayer of innocent womanhood!"

Watching her as he measured the words out to their fullest effect, he saw her face change. The lazy contemptuous smile departed, the grey eyes opened wide. They fixed upon his, and questioned them.

"Not—not Claud Laughton?"

Roper sat himself down as near to her as he dared.

"Now, my dear Miss Petherway, I must crave your patient indulgence for a while. I have been to a world of trouble and expense in my investigation of this affair. I have travelled thousands of miles, and shockingly neglected my own business, all with but the one object in view—to help you in your praiseworthy resolve to perform a most difficult public duty. How I honour and admire you for it, my efforts in your service alone can

prove. So now listen while I take up the thread of the story at the place where my last letter left off."

He held up a portentous forefinger at her.

"You remember that I hinted at the likelihood of a journey to America? You will have wondered what this could possibly have to do with the inquiry I had set on foot. Well, it had all to do with it, as the sequel shows. I have been to New York, and I have returned with indisputable evidence of the guilt of this man—evidence that could have been obtained in no other way. Now, listen. All I told you of this person's affairs—his marriage, his institution and subsequent withdrawal of divorce proceedings on account of the suicide of the wretched woman—all that is true, or at least as true as is possible to prove it from the records of the time. But one curious point struck me. There were too many disappearances in this case. The husband disappeared shortly after the tragedy, as we know. The wife disappeared into her grave. But that was not all. I found out that the co-respondent, the broken-down actor, whose name was Jacobs, also vanished. Why this should seem to me peculiar, and why I was so desirous of finding out what became of Jacobs, I cannot explain. Perhaps it was the very unusual fact of a dissolute, penniless hanger-on to the fringe of a low profession appearing in the rôle of co-respondent in a *cause célèbre*, that turned my mind to it. Anyhow, I went to work on this cross-scent, and soon brought to light a series of startling facts. Jacobs, it turned out, was no longer seen about his old shady haunts for a very simple reason—he went to America within a week or two of the abrupt conclusion of the case. He went under an assumed name, and alone; but in the States he was joined by a female companion. And——" Roper sprang up, his haggard eyes aglow with an evil triumph he was at no pains to conceal. "And that woman was none

other than Lilian Laughton, otherwise Lil Vavasour, the dancer—she who was supposed to have thrown herself over London Bridge!"

There fell a silence in the room, broken only by the steady drip of the water outside. For a full minute Rose Petherway seemed to hold her breath. And then, so low that her words almost escaped her eager listener:

"You went to America—you tracked these people down, and——"

"Jacobs is dead. He died years ago. The woman is here—now—in this very house—ready to my call!"

Again a dead silence fell between them. Slowly Rose Petherway got up from her seat, passed to the window, stood a while looking out through the rain-blurred panes. Once she flashed round upon him.

"This is no hoax? You have not got it all up to deceive me? This woman is really the first wife, and no impostor?"

Roper started for the door.

"She has her marriage-certificate with her. She will show it to you. In a moment I can fetch her——"

"Stop, you fool! Why should I want to see her?"

She had turned her back upon him again. Again the silence gathered about them, with the monotonous drip-drip of the rain on the sill outside, making a kind of knell upon the air. The daylight was fast failing. Roper drew softly near.

"You are right, my dear Miss—Miss Rose. Your name must not, shall not, ever be mixed up in so shocking an affair. Your part is done, and nobly done. There remains only the one last painful duty; and that I must perform. I have explained to Mrs. Laughton all about her husband's present circumstances, and she agrees with me as to the only course now open to her. Delay in making herself known to him would serve no good purpose.

I have a horse-and-trap ready. She shall be sent to Whinbury at once."

With the same soft, cat-like step, he was making for the door again, when the figure at the window swept round, darted in front of him, struck his hand from the latch.

"Oh, you miserable cowardly villain! Have you no heart at all? Or are you only a wicked fool? Is this your criminal?—your betrayer of innocent womanhood? Why, the man has done no wrong! In nothing you have told me, has there been the slightest stain on his honour. And if this wretched woman chose—for some inconceivable reason—to deceive him with a false tale of her death, how is he to blame for what he has since done?"

Roper listened, his eyes fixed on the flaming face before him. He turned slowly away, but in a moment was back at her side.

"You call me hard names!" he cried, with an assumption of passion as violent as her own, "I, who have never harmed you! And you have nothing but excuses for this other man—one who has offered you personally the greatest insult and wrong that can be offered to any woman!"

She drew back, flinching as though he had struck her.

"What do you mean?" she asked, under her breath.

"Oh, my dear, dear Miss Rose! It is no secret. All the world knows the story; and, as is the way of the world, it indulges its merriment at the expense of the one who is wronged. Yes! though you should hate me for ever, I must let you know it; everyone is laughing at you—you, the true-born lady, thrown over for a common village wench! Ay! and no one, so I hear, tells the story with more gusto and point than this precious bee-monger himself. He amuses his friends finely at your expense, if I am rightly informed."

She had turned to the table and sunk down in the

chair close by. Now her face was hiding in her sleeve. Roper laid his hand upon the latch once more.

"Of course," said he, with gentle righteousness of indignation, "I can well understand the principles that sway you in this, and all honour to them, say I. You feel that, in spite of the bitter insults he has heaped upon you, and the innocent young life he has wrecked, his punishment should not be left to private hands, but should devolve on the law. Well and good; I respect your opinion, but I cannot go so far with you. For my part, bad as he is, I want to give the poor devil another chance. I have my duty to do, and with that I cannot allow anyone—not even you, Rose—to interfere. But if I abstain from bringing the vengeance of the law down upon him, it is all I can do. I must see to it that his own conscience accuses him, and to that end he must be brought to a true knowledge of his infamy. Well, there is only one way to do that, as I have realised all along. Yes, you must concede me this one point—you must let me give him this one last chance."

His low voice had ceased. Waiting for him to go on, and wondering at his continued silence, Rose Petherway lifted her face at last. She started to her feet. She was alone in the room: so silently had he gone that not the faintest click of the latch had reached her ears, though the door was closed as before.

She darted to the window. There were voices at the entrance below, and a closed fly was drawing to the curb. She tore at the window-fastenings: they were jammed tight. Swiftly crossing to the door, she had flung it open, when the rattle of departing wheels sounded from the yard.

When presently Roper returned to the room, he found her just as he had left her, sitting by the table, her face pillowed upon her arm.

"Rose!"

He might as well have spoken to the brick wall.

"Rose! My dear, dear girl!"

But at that she was up and facing him in the fast gathering dusk, a hard glitter in her eyes, all the blood of her cheeks gathered into two dark central spots.

"Rose, Rose!" she cried, mocking him. "Your dear girl!—you have made her as vile a wretch as yourself! Yes!—fit only to be the dear girl of such as you!"

He had drawn very near to her now. His vinous breath struck hot upon her face, but she moved not an inch.

"How cruel you are!" The words broke from him in a harsh, ardent whisper. "How unjust, and how ungrateful! See how I have revenged you! You hated a man: you had but to raise your little finger to me, and it was enough! I would have shot him dead as carrion, if you had said the word; but I did infinitely more. I have ruined him—stripped him of his all—driven him out into the wilderness to rot alive! And all for you! Oh, you beautiful, sneering, stony-hearted witch! Does not that teach you at last how I love you? Will you not give me one kiss for all my pains?"

And ere she divined the drift of his purpose, he had her fast in his embrace—crushing her arms helplessly to her sides—pressing his hot lips upon her mouth, her cheeks, her very eyes and hair, as he struggled with her, overcoming her wild resistance with his great strength as a hawk would overcome a mouse.

"Silence!" he rasped in her ear, as she fought with him. "Silence is best. They are used to ladies' little remonstrances in this house, and no one will heed you. Lie quiet, lie quiet, my beauty!—here where I have longed to hold you! Give me what I want, my Rosie, my Rosie! It is bought and paid for! Give me——"

And then, as he tripped her and would have borne her down with him, she felt his furious grip relax. He started, turned a fearful face towards the window. In a moment she had wrenched herself from him, sprung aside, and brought up stock-still, listening as intently as he.

A ringing high note had suddenly pierced the gloom of the apartment. It came from outside the window—a wild, whimpering outcry, amazingly shrill and loud; a note that might have been the wail of a lost spirit passing to the nether world.

Roper's knees knocked together visibly, and his teeth rattled in his head.

"What—what is it? in God's name!" he screamed. And he got his rejoinder swiftly. With an answering scream, but not of fear, only bitter laughter, Rose Petherway stooped and picked up her heavy riding-whip from the floor. Once, twice, she struck at him with all her force, and even in that deep twilight she saw the blood spurt black from his terror-blanched face. Again and yet again, as he cowered before her, she brought the massive silver butt of her whip down upon the hands that strove to fend off the blows, and heard his fingers crack. And then—remembering nothing of how she got there—she found herself out in the dripping silence of the street, rushing along through mud and darkness, intent only on getting her horse and riding away from the place as from the den of a loathsome beast.

And as she splashed through the mire, Rose Petherway kept laughing out the same wild refrain of words: "A snail, a common snail, dragging its wet shell over the window-glass! Oh! this brave soldier-gentleman!—not afraid to murder men and ruin women; yet frightened to death like the four-and-twenty tailors in the nursery-rhyme!"

Long after the door had slammed upon him, long after he had heard the house-door below crash open and hurrying footsteps die away in the length of the street, Roper remained cowering in the same posture in which he had received the last swingeing blow. But presently he took to staring about him, then to cursing deeply but softly, then to dabbing his cut and bleeding pate. Finally, he got to his feet, descended the stairway, and crept out into the moist, oppressive night.

His head ached horribly, his brain was in a whirl, his bruised knuckles throbbed with pain. He could not think: he could only move unsteadily forward—whither he did not care—the lees of terror and rage bitter as gall in his heart. Thus at length he came out of the maze of side-alleys into the open space of the market-square, and then his scattered wits reassembled themselves.

"It is all up!" he muttered, as he wandered aimlessly to and fro. "I have ruined everything, everything! That cursed champagne: Lil would have it, and she knew very well I can never—— Oh, you mad, mad fool!—to have gained so much so hardly, and then to throw away all!"

Lights were kindling here and there in the shops surrounding the market-place. It seemed to be clearing a little overhead, and the pavements were getting thronged. In his desperate state, Roper had no mind either for illumination or company, and he strolled away towards the darkest side of the square, where stood the church. Stepping out, to avoid the jutting porch, he came suddenly upon a figure standing in the corner beyond. In the faint light, he could just make out that it was a man in country garb, with a bundle of tools across his shoulder. The man stood quite still, gazing into the dark angle formed by the protruding portico of the building; and, strange

to say, he was talking to himself in a low, mournful tone. Roper slackened his pace to listen.

"There ut be!" the man was saying. "Th' very spot! An' Lorsh! caan't I a'most see her, along o' her ould faather as is dead an' gone. Blew eyes, an' so purty; an' sech a winnin' way wi' all th' folk! Bee-skeps?—douse my wig!—where be th' man as could help buyin' when——"

Becoming suddenly aware that he was not alone, he had broken off short in his soliloquy. Roper had an inspiration. He started forward, holding out his hand.

"Isn't it Mr. Lindup, of Whinbury? Don't you remember me, Lindup? I have offen seen you when I was staying at Petherway's farm."

George Lindup peered at the speaker through the gloom.

"'Tis so daark, I doan't rightly know as I recker-members ye all at wanst-like—— Lor', yes! I knaws ye now, sir! How d'ye do?"

Roper fumbled for the outstretched hand in the darkness. He gripped it warmly. Swiftly he made up his mind to a crowning piece of useless mischief—the finishing touch to all the ill he had wrought.

'Well, I am very glad to have found you at last, Lindup. The truth is, I have been looking for you all over the town with a message from Miss Petherway. I am afraid it is bad news—bad as ever it can be, I am sorry to say."

"Bad news?" George Lindup slowly repeated the words as though they conveyed no present meaning to him. "Bad news, did ye say? An'—an' from Miss Rose?" He took another long look at the man by his side. "An' you be come arter me?" Roper felt, rather than saw, a swift change come over him. "Speak, sir! Out wi' ut, quick, for the love o' the Lord!"

Roper's voice came to him out of the darkness full of indignant grief.

"My poor dear fellow, how can I tell you? But you must nerve yourself to it! Miss Petherway has told me all about the shameful way you have been treated; so I know well how it must come to you. But I promised to find you at once, and tell you what terrible thing has happened. Your old sweetheart——"

At that George Lindup gave himself a mighty shake that set the woodman's tools he carried jingling on his back. He lunged forward.

"'Lisbel, d'ye mean? What o' 'Lisbel?"

"My dear Lindup! It has come like a thunder-clap upon us all. All her friends at Whinbury are in the greatest grief about her. The poor girl, it seems, has been horribly deceived and betrayed. This scoundrel, Laughton, who pretended to marry her, it turns out, was already a married man who had run away from his wife. And now the real wife has found out his hiding-place, and come to claim her rights. Oh, it is a shocking story! And the poor girl whom he has so heartlessly ruined——"

"Stop!"

George Lindup had put so heavy a hand on Roper's breast as all but sent him staggering backwards.

"Stop, sir!" He gave himself another prodigious shake so that the clatter of his harness echoed across the square. "Stop, stop! 'Tis enough! I warnts to hear no more! Oh! my Gord alive! Little 'Lisbel!"

He swung the sheaf of tools from his shoulder thudding to the ground, seized from among them a heavy beetle; and, without another word or look at Roper, went storming away through the darkness in the direction of the Whinbury road.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RINGING

ON the bee-farm, all hours of the working-day were happy hours to Elisabel; but with the fall of each evening, there came one that was happiest of all, although, for her, it was the most solitary.

It was the end of joyous labour, and the beginning of joyous rest. Not a moment of that hour would Elisabel have foregone on any consideration. Directly the dusk began to gather, she relinquished her share of the common work among the hives, and went up alone to the Bee-Barn, to set the house tidy and to prepare the evening meal. Elisabel loved order and routine mainly because these, while enabling her hands to work swiftly and well, left her mind free to wander whither it would. Thus this hour before supper-time, full as it was of small domestic matters, was also the time for leisurely cogitation, when many involved things disentangled themselves, and many dark things became clear.

Elisabel came into the Bee-Barn out of the dreary October dusk, and stopped to look about her. The great lofty living-room was lighted only by the glow from the fire, where sundry pots and pans and kettles were busily simmering. The ruddy light spread in all directions, not dissipating the gloom, but picking out all the bright objects in the apartment far and near; and, brass or

steel, chinaware or pewter, drawing from them all the same quivering, rosy glitter that, to Elisabel, always seemed a kind of harmonious talk going on at this time amidst her inanimate possessions.

Elisabel went about the spacious room, sweeping and dusting and contentedly pondering her lot.

One by one she took up the Eastern rugs that lay here and there on the polished floor, and shook them over the edge of the verandah. Then she tidied Claud's desk, putting the pens and paper and account-books ready for him, when, at the end of the evening, he would at last reluctantly turn to them. It was time now to think of laying the table for supper. The white damask cloth was spread; the knives and forks, and other gear, set round the board with neat precision; the old blue Delft plates and dishes put by the fire to warm; the beeswax candles lighted in the old copper sconces round the walls, and the lamp that stood amidst its flower-vases on the loaded table. Then, after a final look round to see that all was ready, Elisabel climbed the ladder-stair to her crow's-nest room in what had been the eastern bay of the old barn, there to busy herself with the last and more personal item in her preparations.

For ten minutes or so the red firelight was the only living, moving thing in the cavernous apartment. Then the far-away notes of "Clementine" shed their stifled, boxed-up quality, and became free and clear. The little door at the top of the stair swung back. Elisabel came forth again, singing quietly to herself, a ribbon in her hair and her home-made robe pretty and flowing about her, as she ran lightly down with a swift sidelong glance at the clock.

Plenty of time yet: there was almost half an hour before she need fetch the old copper pan and key to ring her bee-men in to supper. She wandered to the fireside,

and knelt there a while watching the glowing embers, her fingers buried in the soft fur of the cat that slumbered on the rug.

The rich light poured upon her as she knelt. The clock in the corner solemnly beat time to the sizzling kettle-music and hubble-bubble of pot and pan. The great three-legged witch's cauldron on the hob lifted its lid now and again, and sent forth a steamy, fragrant sigh. Somewhere in the black depths of the chimney a cricket chirped. Elisabel got her face between her two hands, and laughed for very joy.

It was a low laugh, so low that it added scarce anything to the volume of fireside melody; but all her heart found happy vent in it.

What was there in the whole world, she thought to herself with a sudden hard tightening at the throat—what blessing dear to, what possession coveted by, woman-kind, that had not been given to her, full measure, pressed down and running over? She looked about her at the cheerful cosy room. She kissed the ring upon her finger, and thought of its giver. Loving husband and happy home, health and strength, the promise of a greater joy than all when the winter was past and the year in tender leaf again—it was all hers, all here in present good or glad forewarning.

The low laugh came again, and with it an odd pricking in her eyes. Elisabel rose hastily and went to the door-place, there to stand and look out a while upon the torpid, melancholy night, as though some counterpoise of gloom were needed to keep her justly in the balances.

And as she stood listening, wondering at the stillness, the gate at the foot of the hill creaked open; fell to again with its usual hollow clang. Who was it coming? The bee-men were away in the little outhouse at the far end of the farm, boiling syrup for the autumn feeding. Elisabel

could hear both their voices clearly in the mute dismal night. Who was it coming, then? she idly conjectured, as presently shuffling footsteps began to ascend the path. If it were some friend of Claud's, the steps would turn off at the cross-way towards the lighted shed; but if—— No; whoever it might be was coming up to the house, picking a way with many haltings and stumblings as one upon an unfamiliar road.

Elisabel ran and got the lantern, and stood at the summit of the steps holding it high above her head, to light the visitor to the door.

Nearer and nearer came the steps, now curiously jostling each other, now ceasing entirely for a moment or so, now trudging steadily on. But ever they came nearer and louder. At last a figure drew into the yellow circle of light, and, at sight of it, Elisabel fell back amazedly. It was a stranger, a strange woman, hard of feature and gross of build, and so gaudily attired that even in that dim light the colours of her dress were painful to look upon. As Elisabel retreated, the woman came on. Slowly she climbed the steps, pulling heavily at the banisters as she advanced. She drew to a halt at last in the full light of the doorway, staring at Elisabel with sulky, half-amused defiance, and swaying her whole bedizened body as she stood.

A fearful, painted woman, wrinkled and scarred and old under her paint, and all the more hideous for the remnant of bygone beauty that yet hovered about her leering features—a woman clad from chin to toe in faded crimson plush, her head of bright yellow dyed hair, surmounted by an immense hat and towering feather of peacock blue; a woman slack-lipped, glassy-eyed, maudlin through drink, who twirled a frilled umbrella between dirty white kid-gloves, and stared at the astonished girl before her with a look of mingled amusement and rude hostility.

"Is—is this where Mr. Claud Laughton lives?"

She steadied herself on the door-post, and yawned as she asked the question.

"Yes, it is. What do you want here?"

Something in the breathless bewilderment of Elisabel's reply seemed to excite the woman's mirth, for she went off in a cachinnation of laughter.

"What do I want here? Ha, ha, ha! Oh! you'll find out soon enough! All in good time, my pretty bird! But if this is his house, there's no call for me to stop outside in the damp and dark. I guess I'll come in!"

At that she relinquished her hold on the door-post, and pushing past the astounded girl, sailed unsteadily into the room. She brought up against a chair, sank heavily into it, and began to stare about her with rude curiosity.

"Well, I never! A pretty little nest he has feathered for his pretty bird, to be sure! And dinner all ready?—ah! I'm just in time! But where is he, my girl? Just tell him one of his old chums has come to pay him a visit, will you? Lord! I'm as sleepy as an owl!"

She had leaned back, stretching her arms above her head; but the next instant had started up again. Elisabel, utterly nonplussed for the moment at this unmannerly invasion, had come to her old resourceful self at last. She had crossed the room at a bound, and was standing over the intruder with hands clenched, an ominous sparkle in her eyes.

"What do you mean? How dare you force your way into this house! Who are you?"

The woman mimicked her tone scornfully.

"Who am I?" She bridled. "Now, my dear girl, what right have you to ask me all these questions?—*you!*"

"I have every right, I suppose. I am Mr. Laughton's wife, and——"

"His wife, eh?" She looked Elisabel up and down with offensive jocularity. "Ah! hm! I can see well enough you think you are! But things are not always what they seem, my child. Never be too sure of anything in this wicked world, my dear!"

She was yawning again. Elisabel's hand fell suddenly upon her arm. Pale with anger, she pointed to the door.

"Go! Go this instant, or I will call for help and have you turned out!"

The painted woman became suddenly aggressive. She shook off Elisabel's grasp. She reeled to her feet.

"Don't you lay hand on me, you tallow-faced hussy!" she cried warningly. "I've a right here; a good deal more right than you, though perhaps you don't know it! Ah! perhaps you really don't! I never thought of that! But it would be just like Claud. A close-lipped, sly old dog he always was; and is still, no doubt. So very likely he has not told you much about me."

"Told me about you—you? Then who are you? What is your business here?"

The painted woman was fumbling in her pocket. She tossed a greasy slip of paper at Elisabel's feet and yawned again.

"Can you read?" she asked insolently. "Well, read that. That will tell you who I am, and what I have come for."

Elisabel stooped and snatched the paper up. She carried it to the table, unfolding it under the light of the lamp. The woman watched her as she read.

The old clock ticked its drowsy tune in the silence. The cricket chirped. The witch's cauldron lifted its lid and sighed. Elisabel bent over the paper, not a muscle moving in her white face.

Tick-tack went the slow old clock, counting the minutes

by. And still Elisabel's dark head bent over the soiled and crumpled sheet: still the painted woman watched her from her seat by the fire. At last the silence got too tense even for maudlin Lil Vavasour. She rose, made a wide detour, came up on the farther side of the table. And then a faint perception of things began to steal across her muddled brain. The girl's face still bent to the printed form with its filling of faded ink, but her eyes looked straight over it and beyond. And the eyes were sightless, soulless, fixed: the face was a face of stone.

The painted woman shuffled her feet: she raised her dirty glove and coughed behind it: she came up close to the table and rapped upon it with her knuckles. At the sound Elisabel started wildly, was still again a moment, then slowly moved to the door. On the threshold she stopped and turned, gripping the door-post as the woman had done. And just in the same way, her whole body swayed from side to side as she spoke.

"You are Lilian—Laughton?"

"That's me, my dear."

"You will stop here, of course. . . . It is—your place by right. . . . Will you not take off your coat and hat—and sit down?—sit at the top of the table there. Do please! . . . I—wish it so."

The painted woman stared. A little of her old defiant insolence flared up in her face. But the dry, fixed, soulless eyes in the doorway beat her down: and the dead voice frightened her. She did as she was bidden; did it with confused and hurrying fingers, never taking her glance from Elisabel the while.

"And now . . . wait!"

From its nail under the porch Elisabel took down the old battered copper skim-pan that had been used in her father's family for bee-ringing for generations untold, and might have rung home a thousand Whinbury swarms.

With this in one hand, and the great door-key in the other, she turned and passed out to the edge of the verandah. The painted woman saw her bring up stock-still, saw her tall figure in its flowing black silk gown rock for a moment like a ship in a gale, then recover itself and stand firm and true. And then the wild music of the ringing pealed out through the darkness of the October night, loud and fast, soft and slow, steady rhythmic chime and hurrying clashing melody, until the hillside was alive with echoes and all the dogs in the village below returned a yelping chorus.

"All right, Elisabel! We are coming, coming! Give us five minutes more—three minutes!—just to rake out the fire."

She had caught the cheery answering voice from the distant furnace-house. The ringing died away. The pan and key fell clattering to the boards of the verandah. Elisabel came and leant upon the door-post again, dumbly waiting. Presently, at a curious sound from within the room, her wide wild eyes sought the figure by the table. The golden head lay among the plates and dishes: Lil Vavasour snored.

"Hush!"

The warning finger held up to him, stopped Laughton in full flight as he came bounding up the steps towards the door. With Elisabel's name fondly on his lips, and laughing gaily, he stretched his arms out to the figure silhouetted against the lamplight. But Elisabel shrank from him, her hand still held rigidly aloft.

"Hush! Do not wake her! Look, Claud!—there at the table!"

But Claud only looked at the ashen face before him. His laugh soused out.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! is anything the matter? You are not ill? You——"

'Look, look, I tell you! Look at her—say if you know her!"

At that he wheeled sharply round—took a step forward—came to a dead stop, peering incredulously at the chairful of crimson plush, and the dishevelled heap of golden hair upon the table. A smothered exclamation escaped him.

"Good heavens! Elisabel! What on earth——! How in the world did that get in here? Whoever can it be?"

Elisabel's hand still pointed. Claud hardly knew the voice that answered him.

"Who can it be? She says she is—your wife!"

Tick-tack, tick-tack, went the sedate old clock in its corner. In the black depths of the chimney the cricket sang its merriest tune. Lil Vavasour snored.

Tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-tack. The silent minutes sped on. The man, bending over the unconscious form by the table, looked up at last. Livid-faced, a ghastly, glittering dew upon his brows, shaking in every limb, Claud Laughton looked up at last, and met the eyes of the woman in the doorway.

"You know her, then?"

His lips parted but made no sound. He clutched at the table behind him.

"It is true, then, that she was married to you before—before——?"

Still no word came to him, though his whole visage worked, a harsh, guttural sound escaped his throat.

"And I—I am not your wife? I have no right in this house? That—that is its true mistress?"

But now, at last, the blood that his heart had refused to drive for so many agonising moments came flooding hot into Claud Laughton's face. The power of speech and action returned to him, and with it a full realisation

of the desperate strait in which he stood. In a moment he had gained Elisabel's side, flung himself at her feet, clinging to her hands, her clothes.

"Listen, and judge me, Elisabel!" he cried to her. "It is true—all true! But there is more that you must and shall know. Yes! it is true. Long years ago I married this woman. I did it in an hour of madness and folly, and bitterly I was brought to book. She was unfaithful—she was drunken—she made our brief life together a nightmare horror to me—she robbed me of nearly all I had in the world. And then, when I was seeking the aid of the law to dissolve the tie between us, she died, or so I was led to believe—died by her own hand:—some of her clothes were found in a recess on London Bridge, with a letter for me, confessing her guilt and saying she was about to drown herself. And all that was twelve long years ago. And never since have I had one word or sign from her. And never, to this moment, have I dreamed of the possibility that her intention was unfulfilled—that she still lived. This is the truth, the whole truth, Elisabel! Judge me, judge me!—now, as I kneel before you! Say what wrong I have done!"

She had listened to his wild, broken words as he clung to her, but she had never ceased in her effort to free herself from his clasp. Now she drew her hand firmly from his. She looked straight before her into the darkness, her face cold and white as snow. Hardly could he catch the words, so faintly they fell to him.

"Wrong? Wilful wrong?—no, no! thank God! Oh! I knew it, Claud, knew it from the very first! You have not wronged me willingly: you *could* not do it. That will help us—that thought will make us both brave when—when——"

He started to his feet, a faint inkling of her purpose breaking in upon him.

"What is it you will do? You will never leave me? You will never shatter, ruin, our two lives for a mere——"

"Hush! Hush! you will wake her! That I could not bear. Oh, Claud! I must go, and she must stay! It is your duty, and her right!"

Pale as death again, he stood looking at her for one silent moment. And then, despairfully, he let his arms fall to his sides.

"Her right?—*right?* What right did she ever have that she has not forfeited long ago? Legally, yes, this debased, wretched creature is still my wife. But actually—in the sight of God—who is it that has the right to bear that name? Oh, my darling! It is you, you alone! You I love—you only! There is no one else in the world for me! In God's eyes, by all the laws of love and justice, you, you, are the true and only wife!"

Slowly, step by step, she had drawn from him, ever keeping her face to the darkness. But she turned at this, not meeting his glance but looking straight through him and past him with her wide, fixed, sightless eyes. Like the stroke of a passing-bell for all his hopes, the words came back to him.

"Right is right, Claud; and wrong is wrong. Between the one and the other a great gulf is fixed, which none may pass who confess Christ and obey His Word. You have done no wilful wrong. But wrong has been done, and must be righted now at any cost. It is not love that is your bond, but your sacred marriage vow, wherever first given. Your real wife lives—your duty is to her, whatever she has become. I am nothing to you but—but——"

Fiercely he broke in upon her.

"Elisabel, it is false—all false and wicked sophistry! But even if you were right, what then? What is true to-day must be true to-morrow. And to-morrow—almost

with a stroke of a pen—law and church will both free me, and you can still——"

"No, no! That cannot help us, Claud! What I am, you have made me; and that I must remain for ever: nothing you can do now can change the past. What you are——"

"Ah! what am I, indeed?" he cried to her despairingly, as she paused. "What shall I become without you? What life is possible for me now? Oh, Elisabel! do you not see the peril you are forsaking me to? To right this wrong, as you call it, and to right it in the way you choose, needs the strength of an archangel. It is beyond all human power. If you leave me now, you leave me to certain failure—degradation—death, and worse than death!"

Out of the darkness of the garden her sobbing words came back to him.

"Oh! I dare not, I dare not! The Great Gulf! It is so wide—it is between us now!—and I have promised——"

He pressed to the edge of the balcony, his arms outstretched to the spot in the night where the voice was receding. Wildly, brokenly, his own voice pealed out.

"If you will do nothing, bear nothing, for love of me, will you not do it for—for my child?"

But he was calling to the empty air. Far below he heard the gate clang, and her footsteps die away in the sodden lane that led to the village. He burst from the house, walking like a blind man with arms still outstretched to her, moaning her name as he went. Swiftly he traversed the bee-farm in the way she had gone, dragging his feet and stumbling like a man wearied to the last atom of his strength. But at the gate he stopped, turned back a little, cast himself miserably down on the sodden grass by the path-side.

"No, no! It is no good!" he cried to the black stillness around him. "She has promised her God—she will win for herself the Crown of Glory, and for me—a chain in Hell!"

Long he lay there, his face buried in his sleeve. But at last a stealthy footfall on the gravel close by, brought him suddenly to his senses. He sprang up.

"Who is that? Is it you, General?" he cried. And advancing in the direction of the sound, he fell headlong over a crouching figure—scrambled to his feet, only to fall again senseless under a crushing blow.

CHAPTER XXV

BELATED LIGHT

THE day was breaking over Whinbury Hill and filling the Bee-Barn with its grey cold light. On the walls the candles guttered uselessly in their sconces. The table-lamp had burnt itself to a spark, which was sending a curl of evil smoke into the air. Lil Vavasour lifted her golden head, yawned outrageously, and fell to staring about her in sleepy surprise.

An unaccountable condition of things presented itself. A big brawny man in his shirt-sleeves was slowly perambulating the apartment, hands thrust deep in trouser-pockets, a stern, hard look upon his ruddy face. Across one end of the room a screen of curtains had been improvised, and just outside this sat a little woman in brown, her pale, care-ridden face anxiously turned to some invisible object within. And at the open door stood another man, a grotesque figure in corduroys, a stunted, bow-legged creature with a huge bald head and eyes raw through weeping, who, as Lil's vacant glance travelled in his direction, shook a great fist at her with such savage meaning that she bounced involuntarily to her feet.

"Hist! Stop that row!"

It was the big man in shirt-sleeves who spoke. He had come to a sudden halt in his stride, swung round, and was now bearing down upon Lil Vavasour with a look

that was even more minatory than that of the man in the doorway. He pulled up short when but a foot or so from her, his hands still deep in his pockets.

"You—you hag!" said he, in a fierce whisper. One hand came out of its pocket and went to rumple in the man's crisp black curls. "Who sent you here to work the devil's own mischief? Who was it? How did you find this place?"

The questions escaped his lips like the hissing reports of an air-gun, and ere the yet sleep-beclouded brain of the woman before him had taken them in, his other hand had leaped from its pocket, and was pointing to the door.

"I think you'd better go," said he, less unkindly now, as though recollecting himself. "Go and walk about outside: the fresh air will blow a little sense and decency into you. And stay out there until I come to talk to you. Now, be off!"

Stephen Brent had expected a torrent of abuse, or at least determined opposition, but there came neither one nor the other. Without a word, the woman turned and slowly moved to the doorway, the General shrinking from her as she passed him as though she carried the plague. Stephen followed the slatternly figure to the entry, and stood there darkly regarding it until it disappeared round the corner of the house. A hand stole through his arm. Brother and sister stood together in silence under the dripping vine-leaves, watching the white morning change to rose, then to glittering saffron as the first watery sunbeam struck across the village roofs below.

"What—what is going to happen, Stephen?"

Lucy's tremulous words rose scarce above a whisper, and in the same low tone he answered her.

"God alone knows! My head is in a whirl after all

these hours of worry and suspense. He will pull through, I think, if only we can keep him quiet. But he has had an awful slog, and the slightest excitement now—— That's the trouble, Lucy. Directly he comes to himself, and remembers—then the danger will begin."

He crept into the room, passed behind the curtains for a moment, came back to resume his listless posture in the doorway at Lucy's side.

"Still exactly the same, and no sign of fever. The longer he stays so, the better his chance of life. But——"

Slowly he turned. Their troubled eyes met—eyes hollow and wearied from long hours of watching.

"You think then——" she faltered.

"What can I think, dear? It may be that we are only doing him an ill turn after all; it may be the best thing that could possibly happen to him, is that he should never wake again."

Stephen took half a dozen slow strides along the balcony; came back to her side.

"You see, we know so little for certain of what has really occurred, Lucy," he said. "The General knows nothing. He comes in late for supper, finds neither master nor mistress in the house—only a mysterious, unknown woman snoring at the table, obviously drunk. Then, hurrying here and there about the place looking and calling for the missing pair, he stumbles over something in the dark—strikes a match—finds it is Claud lying in a pool of blood, with his head horribly lacerated, and apparently dead. Off he rushes to his master's nearest friend, who happens also to be the nearest doctor. Then we come, and find the woman still in her drunken sleep, and an old marriage-certificate lying on the floor, showing that twelve years ago Claud married someone named Lilian Vavasour. We succeed in rousing the woman sufficiently to extract from her that this is her

name, but can get nothing more out of her. And Elisabel is nowhere to be found, nor even heard of. Those are all the certainties: the rest is nothing but conjecture. Yet the facts seem to point only one way. Claud must have lied to you when he said his former wife was dead. He must have run away from her, I suppose. And now she has turned up in his hiding-place, and Elisabel has left him—gone off, goodness knows where, and in what terrible state of mind. Look! there comes Mr. Jenyns back at last! God send he has news of her!"

Lucy returned to her vigil within, and Stephen hurried down the path to meet the advancing figure.

"No, my dear Brent, nothing as yet—not a word from anywhere."

It was no more than Stephen had expected from the sorrowful cast on Mr. Jenyns' face. The Reverend sat himself down on a neighbouring bench, and looked what he really was—an utterly tired-out man.

"Not a word or a sign, although practically all the village has been out searching for her the whole night through. Peavey has got back from Stavisham, and Joe Fladgate's party from out Whittlesea way. Amos Dawes and those with him are still scouring the Downs, but Amos has sent back word to say that nothing has been seen of her by any of the shepherds between here and Friday's Combe. And she has not been near her old home, as far as we can tell, nor sent any message there. But I must be off again. Sabie is down keeping company with the poor mother and sister, so there is no one at the rectory to receive messages. And there are many other ways that must and shall be tried. Oh! Stephen, we are sure to get news of her before many hours are past, never fear! But what of poor Laughton? Is he out of danger? Have you found out who struck the blow?"

"Mr. Jenyns, I have no idea. And he is still uncon-

scious, so that nothing can be learnt from him, even if he himself knew."

"You have really no suspicion?"

Stephen read the thought in the troubled face before him easily enough.

"No, sir; that is out of the question. Of course, I thought first thing of her old lover, whom she jilted for Claud. But it is well known that George Lindup left the village hours before the thing happened."

Mr. Jenyns eagerly caught him up.

"Yes, and Peavey brought back word that he was seen last evening going through Stavisham on his way to a farm beyond the town, where he had timber to throw. He must have been ten miles away at the time."

The lean, black figure hurried off, and Stephen Brent returned to his steady, silent pacing to and fro in the darkened room.

Over and over again, as he stood with the rector in the soft sunshine of the October morning, a word had risen to his lips and died there unuttered. And, though he had not known it, the same word had failed the grieving old man. The river—what could the river tell of the thing they sought to know?

For where had Elisabel been through all those terrible hours of darkness when Stephen Brent had been putting forth all his skill to save the man she had loved, and had forsaken? Through all his thoughts, in every sob of the grim night-wind and every chance sound of the countryside, he had heard and seen the same thing—the deep, dark flood stemming by through its whistling reeds, the ripple-song and clear bell-like call of eddies in the darkness; the river carrying what terrible secret of dead hope, dead love, down to the brutal, unrecking sea?

Stephen drove his silent course to and fro in the shadowy room. Little flecks of sunshine that had found a crevice

between the blinds, lay here and there on his path like dropped guineas. In the garden without, a solitary robin blew on his slender pipe. Bees came and twanged a harp-string by the open-door, and vanished. The old clock ticked the hours away. And then at last, as for the hundredth time, the watcher bent over the couch by the fireside, a flicker of life showed in the grey, still face—the eyes opened under their wreath of bandages—Claud Laughton looked up into the face of his friend.

"Stephen? . . . Is it you?"

"God be praised! Yes, yes; it is I, old chap. But you must not talk. You must keep as quiet as——"

"And who—is that moving about—in the room?"

"Hush, my dear old fellow! You must keep yourself calm and quiet for all our sakes. It is Lucy—come to take care of you. Lucy and I——"

"But why am I—lying here? Where is——? Oh, my God!—I—I remember—all now!"

The eager halting voice fell; the eyes slowly shut again. So quiet and still he lay, that presently Stephen got hastily to his feet and bent over the pillow, filled with a sudden dread. But the dark eyes were roving once more, and turned at once to his.

"Stephen—I must talk. There are things I—I must tell you. A terrible thing has—has come—to pass. And until you——"

Stephen gently laid his hand upon the trembling lips. He saw that the only way to keep the sufferer quiet was to talk himself—to set Claud's doubts as speedily as possible to rest.

"I know, I know, my dear old chap! There was a paper we picked up. And that woman here; and—and Elisabel gone. We guessed—— And then you were found lying out there, with this fearful wound in your head: one of the worst jobs in my life I have had with

you, stitching like a tailor. But now you must do as I tell you, Claud. If you will only keep quiet, just for the next few hours, you will pull round all right, never fear. But everything, your very life even, depends on that. You must lie still and try to be calm, while your friends work for you."

"Does—does Elisabel know—about this, Steve?"

At the name, Stephen Brent's heart missed a beat.

"She must know by now. They have gone to tell her, and——"

"But—but *does* she know, Stephen? Where—is she? It—it must be—a long time since—since she went."

And even as Stephen Brent stood appalled at this dilemma, his heart sinking, sick with grief, a note was pressed into his hand. He tore it open.

"Whinbury Rectory.

"Better news. At least, she is safe. A message has reached Mrs. March by the miller's van which met her early this morning on the road near Marshminster. And Miss Petherway has gone with her carriage and fastest horses, to find and bring her back. "A. J."

In a moment Stephen's mind was made up. He bent and valiantly whispered the lie into Laughton's ear.

"My dear, dear old boy, it is a message to you from Elisabel. They have found her in Marshminster. They have told her of your injury, and she is coming back as fast as she can, to be with you and care for you. So now there is nothing to do, or to think of, but to lie still and wait."

So far, so good. Stephen was at his old unresting work again—up and down, up and down, between the curtained bed and the green vine-garland of the door; and every time he turned, the same words mutely formed

themselves upon his lips. So far, so good. But what next? What had he really to count upon? How was his lie to the stricken man to be justified? Of Rose's speed in the chase he had no doubt, nor of what Elisabel would do, so soon as she learned of Claud's disaster. But would Rose ever find the fleeing, distracted girl? or, having found her, bring her back in time?

It was so far—very far, indeed. But it was not so very good, as Stephen Brent, the physician, well knew. He could not disguise from himself, much as he strove to do so from others, the dire peril in which Claud Laughton lay. The most favouring circumstances, the best treatment, the heartiest will to live on Claud's part—all together made up but an even chance. And if there were long-drawn-out delay, if hope deferred, attenuated to the slenderest thread, were to be snapped at last by Rose Petherway's return and chronicle of failure—all their hopes might come down about their ears like a house of cards.

Stephen ran all ten fingers through his crisp black curls, as he stared out into the sunny garden; and his cheek blanched at the thought. Furiously he spun round on his heel. No!—he would not think of it yet—there was Rose Petherway to count upon in the game; and of that resolute, resourceful damsel beaten and discomfited at any game, his mind was incapable of forming a picture. No!—he would stake his all upon Rose. Elisabel alive meant a wronged, loving woman restored—the wrongdoer plucked from death, body and soul, like a brand from the burning.

Down on the bee-farm, under the soft amber light of the autumn day, the General went about his work among the hives, dragging with him a heart heavier by far than the barrow that groaned and rumbled in his wake.

Every time he stopped to replenish the feeder of a

hive, the stream from the syrup-can splashed over; for the General's eyes were always turning away from the task in hand, to contemplate a distant object. Doddering aimlessly about in the sunshine afar off, the popinjay form of Lil Vavasour had a fascination for the General which he was powerless to resist. All the morning through he had watched the tawdry figure mooning to and fro, or sitting inert in some corner of the bee-farm, or lounging upon the gate below; and every time the General's eyes had rested on the patch of crimson, glowing against the green of the distant hedgerow, his brow had gone dark, and his lips moved in objurgation irrepressible.

"Ornery times," he consoled himself, after each of these outbursts, "'tis wicked fer a Christian man to cuss an' to swear. But, Lor' forgive me! if I can hould back a naughty wured when I thinks o' that there—that there——"

And every time a suitable word failed him, though he conscientiously searched the whole repertory of rustic invective through and through.

But when the clock in the neighbouring church-tower struck twelve, a more charitable mood came over him. He put down the syrup-can, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Arter all," said he, "'a be but human flesh an' blood. Belike 'a be hungry."

He tip-toed into the house, extracted from the larder the remains of a meat-pie and a pitcher of ale, and made his way down to the corner where Lil Vavasour was sitting on a log, her chin in her two hands. He was almost on her before she perceived his advance. And then she rose hastily, and in some trepidation.

"Lor'! ye ha' naun to fear!" said the General scornfully. "If killin' on ye now would undo all the wrong ye've done, Gormed if I moughtn't be tempted—— But

there! Set ye down, an' ha' a bite. Doan't be afeared. 'Twun't pizen ye, though good clane hands made it."

He dumped down half the provender on the log at her side, then moving some way off, seated himself under the hedge and fell to on his own portion.

"If ye caan't eat," said he, looking round after a minute or two, "ye can drink, I'll warrant. Here! take a sup o' that!"

Eagerly Lil Vavasour reached for the pitcher of ale, and lifted it to her mouth. But the next moment she set it down untasted. She pushed it from her.

"No," said she thoughtfully, "none of that now. I'm sober, do you see? And while I'm sober, I want to get to understand things a little." Her eyes pored on the ground for a while. Then she veered round to the little man. "Who are you, then?" she asked abruptly.

The General puffed out his chest.

"I be only plain John Gates, but I mought ha' been a hofficer an' a gennelman by now, if only——"

"Never mind that! You are a sort of man-of-all-work here, aren't you? And she—who is she?"

"She!"

The General's bosom swelled still more, but this time with indignation.

"She?—meanin' Mistus Laughton?"

"Missis? What?—his wife?—regularly married to him?"

The General got to his feet, and bore down upon her, his knotted hands opening and closing convulsively.

"Oh! you wicked piece! You woman o' Gehenna! Didn't I see 'em married wi' my own eyes, ower i' th' church yonder? An' you dare to make out as——"

Somehow or other she seemed no longer afraid of him. She sat unflinchingly under his menacing look and words.

"Don't take on like that," said she, in sullen conciliation, "but help me to understand. Well, she thought she was his real wife, did she? You all thought so? And was he very fond of her, and she of him?"

The General drew in his breath, then let it go in a sort of mournful gusty roar. Lil Vavasour saw the tears start into his eyes.

"Fond o' her! And she fond o' him! Oh! woman, woman! When ye come here straight from th' fires o' Hell, ye come, an' ye knocked down th' beautifullest bit o' human love an' happiness as ever Gorramighty made i' th' wureld! Fond o' her?—all th' prayers as he ever said on his marrer-bones nights an' mornin's, was jest her name, ower an' ower agen—'a tould me so, many's th' time. An' she?—she'd ha' kissed th' dust off his boots any day, if I hadn't been allers spry to get 'em out o' th' road to clane 'em. Fond o' him!—ay! fonder o' him than she wur o' all th' howly angels on Jacob's ladder!"

So waterlogged had the General's vision become, that for a long time he could make out nothing of the woman before him but a blur of red against the green. But when he had transferred the brine in his eyes to his shirt-sleeve, he stared at her—re-applied the sleeve—stared again. He burst forth indignantly.

"Snivellin', be ye! 'Tis all very well fer ye to get all on snivellin' now—now as everything be ruined an' done for, past recall! Wi' she, pore dear, runned off, th' Lor' aloane knaws where, an' he a-lyin' as good as dead, wi' his head bashed to bits!"

"What!"

Lil Vavasour had shot up from her seat.

"What? What did you say?—has he been hurt? How? What's been done to him?"

"Ah! 'tis well enow fer you to snivel, an'——"

To his utter amazement and wrath, he had been seized by the two shoulders and furiously shaken.

"Leave that alone, you silly old bladder of lard! and answer me! She has run off, you say? And he has been knocked on the head? Tell me all about it this instant, or I'll——"

The General broke from her grip, and precipitately put six safe yards of ground between them. He stood shaking a great solemn finger at her.

"'Tis trew, trew as th' sun shines! Th' happiest hoame i' all th' land blowed to spillikins; an' th' sweetest, purtiest woman druv away; an' th' best man as ever drawed breath, like to be drawin' his very laast i' pain an' sorrow this very moment! An' 'tis all o' your doin', —ye blamed, blanked Daughter o' ——"

The painted woman had slowly sunk down in her old attitude upon the log, her chin in her two shaking hands, her blear eyes poring on the ground beneath her. As the General stopped for breath, a low whistle reached him from the house above. Turning, he saw Stephen Brent on the verandah, beckoning to him. He hurried away.

"Get down to my place as quick as you can, John, and ask Captain Brent to give you these things out of my medicine-chest."

The General seized the slip of paper from the outstretched hand, and sidled off at top speed. Stephen lingered a moment on the steps for a draught of the sweet pure air, his tired eyes roving the sunny declivity at his feet. He caught sight of the tawdry figure under the hedgerow, and was glad to note the jug and platter close by, betokening that someone had remembered her needs: he himself had given no thought to them. He turned and re-entered the darkened room.

But not to his old uneasy, yet mentally helpful promenade. He could do nothing now but hover near the

bedside, watching the grey still face on the pillow, hoping and praying that the sleep which at length had brought a little oblivion to the stricken man, might last until wakening should mean for him wakening to renewed gladness of life.

Sitting silently at the bedside, his face shadowed by his hand, rejoicing at the passage of each hour that still left his friend deep in slumber, yet ever anxiously alert for any sound that might announce Elisabel's return, Stephen at last saw the heavy eyelids lift. He rose and bent over the pillow, answering the slow, questioning look.

"Not yet, not yet, my dear old fellow. It is a long way to come, and the roads are heavy for travelling. But keep up heart: she must soon be here."

Claud looked long and earnestly at the face above him.

"She will come—yes, I know she will come—directly she hears. But—but——" The keen eyes were trying to read beneath Stephen's determinedly cheerful look. "Steve: things are pretty much—touch-and-go with me—arn't they? And—and she may be—too late."

He was silent again. Stephen thought him sleeping. But in a little while the hollow bright eyes were shining through the gloom once more.

"Hark! What was that? Is—is she coming at—at last?"

There were voices, a suppressed altercation at the door. Stephen hurried off to find Lucy barring the way against the painted woman.

"Why can't I come in? It isn't your house, is it? There is something I must——"

Stephen took the woman gently but firmly by the shoulders, spun her round, and resistlessly propelled her out into the sunshine. When he had got her safely away

from the house, he let her go. She fluttered from him in breathless confusion.

"Do you know what the inside of a prison-house is like?" said he ferociously. "Well; you dare to show your face at that door again, and off you go to Stavisham gaol!"

Without another word he turned from her, his heart failing him as to how he was to account for this disturbance to the waiting, listening man. But even as his foot trod the threshold, he stopped—laid a quick hand on Lucy's arm—dashed out again upon the balcony.

"Listen!" he cried. "Something is coming! Yes—God be praised! They are here at last!"

There was a thunder of wheels and beating hoofs in the lane below, growing ever nearer and louder. A carriage dashed up to the gate, its horses throwing off a cloud of steam as they were reined back on their haunches. Stephen could hear the roar of their breath, and see the white foam-flecks thick upon them, as though they had been driven many miles at a reckless pace. Hardly had the vehicle drawn to a halt, before a cloaked figure hastily descended from it, and came toiling up the path towards the Bee-Barn. Stephen whirled round.

"It is Elisabel!—Elisabel! Go and meet her, Lucy, and warn her of the danger of exciting him. Tell her to creep in as quiet as a mouse!"

A moment more, and he was bending a radiant face over Claud's pillow.

"She has come—she has come at last!" he whispered joyfully. "My darling has found her, and brought her back to you: I knew there was nothing in the world she could not do!"

The painted woman stood quite still where Stephen Brent had left her, discomfiture, yet not a trace of anger or resentment, on her sullen face. She turned, when he

turned, at the clatter made by the arriving carriage; and watched the cloaked figure ascend the path—saw Elisabel joined by the little woman with the greying hair—stood gazing over her shoulder at them until they vanished within the house. For some minutes after their disappearance she still stood in the same spot, her arms drooping by her sides, her glance fixed on the door through which the pair had passed. And then she gathered up her crimson skirts and slowly moved in the same direction.

She stopped at the open doorway. How silent and empty the house seemed! Stealthily, inch by inch, she advanced until she stood just within the threshold, peering about her. At first she could see nothing in the darkened room, hear nothing save a low murmur of voices infinitely far away. But as the dazzle of the outer sunshine cleared from her eyes, and the rippling robin-music from her ears, she both saw and heard. A woman's words upborne on a flood of weeping: the voice of a man that to her was like the ghost of dead, bygone days.

Silently, yet vehemently, Lil Vavasour plunged into the darkened room, crept along the wall, crouched down in the shade of the curtain, and with trembling fingers parted its folds.

"But how—how do you come—Elisabel?"

The sombre, eager eyes were looking up from the pillow under their crown of bandages. Claud had Elisabel's hand fast within his own. But she had turned from him, stood erect by the bedside, her white uplifted face like the face of a marble sphinx. Claud half raised himself. His voice gathered a new intensity.

"But how—how?"

"Because you are in need,—because you—you sent for me,—because that much I—I may do, and yet——"

Her words died away in pitiful sobbing. But the voice of the man grew strangely resolute and strong.

"And you are willing to stay by me now?—nurse me through this danger?—care for, and watch over me until I am well again? But then, Elisabel?—what then?"

Still holding herself at their two arms' length from him; still with her marble face uplifted, her great eyes fixed on the gloom above, she answered him.

"I—I am not your wife, Claud. I have no right—here. What I have—been to you, I have been unknowingly. It—it can never be again. Then—then I must go."

With a strength as if miraculously given him for the one supreme effort, he had raised himself bolt upright, and turned, striving for a view of her averted face.

"But—but you love me, Elisabel?—you will never cease to love me? You—you will never doubt my own unchanging love for you, whatever befalls?"

"Never, never, never!"

Like the tolling of a clear vibrant bell her cry rang through the room. He pressed the hand to his lips, then let it fall from him. He sank to his pillow again. As from a man moaning in his dreams, the words broke from him.

"It is well, so. The promise—it was but till death. And now, Death, come—come and take your due. Better now than after——"

Softly, silently, the painted woman swept the curtains back, and stepped into their midst. She passed Elisabel—beat down the arm with which Lucy would have restrained her—fell like a trapped tiger into Stephen's arresting grip. Harsh and shrill her voice pealed out as she battled with him.

"Don't stop me now, for the love of God! I must speak to him! I can save him—save them both! I can give him back his wife—give her back her husband—give them both happy life! Let me go, you stony-hearted

brute! Claud, Claud! speak to me! I have done you nothing but evil all my life: now, now! let me do one good thing!"

Stephen Brent, frantic at this sudden upheaval of events and the danger he foresaw in it to his patient, bitterly reproaching himself as its cause, had taken the struggling woman bodily into his arms, and would have borne her away despite her entreaties and violence. But a glance at Claud checked him. The injured man had raised himself on his arm.

"Stephen—let her go—let her go!"

A flush of excitement, the danger-signal that Stephen had all along watched for and dreaded, was on Claud's face. Stephen dared not but obey. He released his hold. Slowly Lil Vavasour drew to the bedside. For a moment she stood meeting Claud's glance. Then her eyes fell; her low voice broke the stillness:

"Listen to me! Listen, all! I am not your wife, Claud Laughton. I never was. I never could be, because I was another man's wife before you met me. My marriage with you was a fraud: it was no marriage, either in sight of God or man. If you have married since, and married a free woman, then she alone is your wife."

Claud's burning glance was on her. His hand rose bickering to his cheek. But Lil Vavasour neither looked up nor stirred. Lower than ever, her voice fell on the silence.

"Why did I come here?—ask the Devil, and one man. I never meant to come. But he found me over in America—bitterly poor, I was; and he promised to bring me here, and send me back again with a pocket full of money, if I would come. But even then I'd never have done it, Claud—never could have done it if I had—had seen her and known——"

She caught her breath, stole one swift glance at the trembling girl behind her, lowered her eyes once more.

"But I was—I was drunk. He made me so on purpose. And then—I—I did it. Now, I would tear my tongue out to undo it all, if I could. But this one thing I can do, and can prove. It is God's truth, what I have told you, Claud. You and I were never man and wife."

Still Claud Laughton's burning eyes were riveted on the daubed, debased features before him; still the woman kept her own glance lowered. The gasping question escaped his lips:

"Where—where, then, was your rightful husband when all the papers were full of your name, and—and mine?"

She answered him like one pleading guilty to some hideous offence.

"Claud, he was there in the court all the time. You forced him there. His name was—William Jacobs."

Claud Laughton all but sprang from his bed.

"Then the co-respondent—the man who was proved to have had all the money you robbed me of—he was really your husband? But why—why did you hatch up that cruel, useless story of your own death?"

Lil Vavasour lifted her eyes straight to his at last, and he saw that they were blind eyes, blind with remorseful tears. She drew nearer, sunk upon her knees by his pillow, so that none but he might catch the words.

"There are things," she whispered hoarsely, fearfully, "that—that pure women must not hear. It was his own plan, to save himself. Claud, you have heard of men who force women to lead dreadful lives for their own gain?—well, he was one of those. And if the case had gone on, all would have come out against him. And—and he would have been punished. So he planned the story of the suicide as the only way to—to stop the case."

With a cry, Claud Laughton turned from her in unutter-

able loathing and horror. The air grew dark about him. A deadly faintness overcame his every sense. The earth seemed to break from its sun-leash in the heaven and sink with him into unfathomable space.

An age he seemed to be falling, falling through the night. And then his giddy swoop downward ended. Out of the darkness there grew a blur of light, ever broadening and shining brighter. His vision cleared. He looked about him in the room. The painted woman had gone. But over him there hung a beautiful face —instead of a pillow, warm strong arms upheld his aching head—kisses rained upon his lips—kisses he would have known in any darkness.

"Elisabel! my darling, my darling! You—you will not go from me now? You will stay—stay with me for —for ever?"

And the kisses became articulate.

"For ever and ever, my darling husband! We will never part again!"

Stephen Brent gripped Lucy's arm, and silently led her from the room, and out under the vine-wreathed balcony. Far below in the lane, a spot of crimson and peacock blue was fading away between the hedgerows. They watched it go together, and with its final disappearance the air seemed to grow purer and the sun to shine with a sweeter light.

"Will he live now, do you think, Stephen?" Lucy asked, as presently they wandered side by side in the garden. Stephen stretched his tired arms luxuriously, and laughed.

"Live?—yes! Live to be a hundred, and teach his great-grandchildren bee-keeping. Nothing could kill a man as happy as that!"

CHAPTER XXVI

STEPHEN TAKES LONG ODDS

STEPHEN BRENT took his way homeward from the Bee-Barn that night, pondering many things. Midway through the resounding city of hives, he stopped and gazed back at the lighted house, fervently thankful that all there was now in a fair way towards the old happy courses. Claud had suffered no ill-effect from the excitement occasioned by Elisabel's return, nor from that evoked by the painted woman's revelations; and, humanly speaking, he had now every chance of a speedy and complete recovery. Elisabel herself was apparently none the worse for her late distressful experiences. The interloper was gone from their path, and gone for ever, as far as could be certainly known. Stephen felt supremely contented with affairs, in those immediate aspects at least.

But though, in the Bee-Barn romance, all seemed now destined to the conventional happy ending of the old-fashioned novel, there were several matters connected with the story still darkly mysterious to Stephen Brent's mind.

Who was the perpetrator of the savage assault on Claud? Who was the man spoken of by Lil Vavasour in her confession; and why should he have brought her so far, at so much trouble and expense? There was indeed the possibility that this part of her statement

was a fabrication; and that her real instigator was the abandoned wretch, her husband, who might have plotted this sequel to his original scheme in hope of additional gain. For obvious reasons he could not himself have appeared on the scene, nor suffered his presence in the country to become known. But whether Lil Vavasour's confederate had been her husband, or some other man, as she averred, it seemed fairly clear to Stephen Brent that here most probably was Claud's assailant. The man, whoever he was, must have accompanied the woman to the place, remained in hiding on the premises, and then, being discovered by Claud, delivered the blow to effect his own escape.

But Stephen—having found an opportunity during the evening for a few quiet words with Claud on the subject, and having enunciated this theory, expressing also his impetuous desire to place the affair at once in the hands of the police—had been astonished to receive from Laughton a point-blank refusal to sanction any such course: the very mention of it, indeed, had thrown Claud into a state of agitation.

"Leave it alone, Steve," he had said, "and let the whole thing die away and be forgotten. What does it matter now? Even if I found the man, I should only want to thank him, to reward him—and I will, too, some day, please God! All the gold in the Indies could not pay for what that blow gave back to me."

Stephen had not pursued the subject farther, but it still engrossed his mind; and now, free for a time from more vital considerations, he dwelt upon it as he descended the path through the bee-farm, weighing all sorts of conjectures, and turning over possible solutions from every standpoint.

Arrived at the gate, he stood hesitating under the quiet starlit night. In the one direction, lay the village and

his home: in the other, the lane led by a roundabout route to Whinbury Farm. Stephen had no doubt of his proper course. Tired out, as he was, from long watching and anxiety, he knew that his wisest plan was to seek home at once, there to obtain the rest he so sorely needed. But his heart cried out for a sight of Rose Petherway, as it ever did when he was away from her. The night was young yet, he argued with his conscience, and he had paid no visit to his patient at the farm since yesterday. There was ample time to stroll that way, and still—— A step sounded close by him. Stephen swung sharply round. Warm hands arrested his in the grey darkness.

"Rose!"

She was well used by now to that ring of delight in his tone, whenever he pronounced her name; and for the first time in their lives perhaps, she let it pass unchallenged—left her hands willingly in his lingering clasp.

"Stephen, is it you at last? I have been waiting for you ever so long. Oh! Stephen, I wanted so to hear! How is he now? Will he get better? Is he—happy again?"

So strained, so agitated, her voice sounded, that Stephen peered at her in some alarm. He concluded that the effort and excitement of her chase after Elisabel had been too great for her strength.

"Come," said he, "I will walk back to the farm with you. I want to see Tom, and we can talk as we go along. Yes, he is out of all real danger, I think. And happy! —happy is not the word: thanks to your splendid work, Rose! You have saved his life, and hers too, I verily believe. They will have good reason to bless you to the end of their days!"

He had set himself at her side to walk with her. But she did not move. For a moment or two she stood

clutching at the gate-top, quite silent but for the swift, faint catching of her breath. And then, to his infinite wonder and concern, she turned and laid her arms along the bar—laid her face upon them—gave herself up to passionate weeping. Brokenly the words reached him as he stood beside her under the pale starlight, distracted at this sudden unawaited turn of things.

"Oh! Stephen, you break my heart with what you say! I save them?—I give them back their happiness? I, who have been plotting and scheming to bring ruin upon them both ever since—— Oh, no, no! Do not be so cruel, so heartless, Stephen! Blame me! Drive me from you, for the shameful thing I am! Strike me down, as he was struck! That I could bear, because I deserve it! But—but——"

Stephen listened, his very pulses stilling with astonishment. Even when her passionate words had tailed away into mere inarticulate sobbing—sobs that followed and overran each other like the waves of an in-driving sea—he could grasp no more than a faint inkling of her meaning.

"What are you telling me, Rose? What is it you have done?" he burst forth incredulously. But with that he came to a dead stop. An indefinable suspicion began to touch his heart coldly. "Tell me!—tell me all!" he cried, in sudden breathless haste.

Still keeping her face hidden in her sleeve, as she sobbed out her story to him.

"I have made you despise me, Stephen, long ago: now I shall make you hate me. When you know what I have done, you will shrink from me as if I carried pestilence; and you will never again look at me—never, never, as long as you live! It has been all my doing, Stephen, all of it! That woman would never have been brought from America, to ruin them—Claud would never

have been struck down—none of this pain and misery and disgrace would have come to poor Elisabel—but for me. I did it, I tell you—all, all! Why do you cry out, as if you do not believe me? Have you not learnt by now what a wicked woman I can be? He did me a wrong. At least he was harsh to me—said things that were true and just, I know; but he said them when they need never have been said at all, and he said them mercilessly. I had made him angry, I suppose. But if I made him angry, his cruel words made a very fiend of me. I vowed I would pay him out, and—and——"

She shuddered, seemed to turn sick at the thought of something, then forced her tongue to the name.

"Roper—that false friend of Tom's—he helped me. He found out about Claud's marriage years ago—found out that the wife had not really killed herself, as Claud believed, but had run away to America; and he brought the woman back for me, to work all this evil. And it was my money that did it all, Stephen. Now say if you do not hate me for what I am—the wickedest woman in the world!"

Stephen had drawn suddenly near.

"Rose!" he cried. "Tell me! Do you know who struck down Claud Laughton? Was that also done with your knowledge and consent?"

"Oh! no, no, no! I know no more of it than you! If I had dreamed that——"

Stephen Brent laughed as a man might laugh, reprieved on the very steps of the scaffold.

"Rose, Rose!" His voice had taken on an infinite tenderness. "Now I know the full measure of the wrong you have done! Tell me no more! All the rest is plain. It was Roper, then, who struck the blow. He had come here with the woman Jacobs, and——"

"The *woman* Jacobs!" She echoed his words.

"There was no woman named Jacobs. That was the name of the——"

Again Stephen laughed that laugh of infinite relief.

"Don't you know, then?" he cried. "That is where salvation comes in for everyone! That is what makes all you have done, and all Roper has done, a blessing to Claud and Elisabel, instead of the disaster it was intended to be. The woman was Jacobs' wife at the time she married Claud; she confessed it to him there at the bedside. Her marriage with Claud was therefore null and void—as though it had never been. And Elisabel has suffered no disgrace. She is, and was, his true and only wife. Rose, Rose! now you know what I meant when I said that it was to you they owed all their present happiness!"

In the pale light he saw her slowly lift her head, and turn upon him a glance of intense searching scrutiny. He could see the tears on her long lashes scintillating in the starshine, and, as he looked, fresh tears coursed sparkling down her cheeks. The gasp that broke from her lips was one as much of horror as wonder.

"Stephen Brent! You know you are seeking to shield a guilty woman: one who has done, or tried to do, a wicked, an unpardonable thing. You are only twisting the facts out of their true meaning. If good has come of the evil, that only condemns the evil-doer all the more. Oh! you know it well enough! Why, why are you seeking to blind yourself, and blind me, to the wrong I have done?"

"Why?"

He leant his arms on the rail beside her, trying to look into her eyes.

"Why?" he said again, slowly, ponderingly, as though he asked the question as much from himself as from her. "Rose, it is because the worst faults in you, the bitterest

words from your lips, the unkindest act you could do to me, are greater and more precious in my eyes than all the virtues and good deeds of all the saints on earth, or above it. You have done wrong—no one knows that better than I. But the wrong has all come right again. Good has come out of it that might never have happened by any other means. Everyone is going to be happy through it—everyone but—but you, and I; for while you are unhappy, I cannot have a moment's peace. That is bad philosophy, if you will. It is dead against all that the parsons teach us. But it is the fact. So though you condemn yourself so bitterly, and others would condemn you, I suppose, who had never been tempted under great provocation, I cannot and will not. What you are, good or bad, is the best for me. You have said that you have made me despise you, Rose: it is not true. The things you were to tell me were to make me hate you. Well, I have heard them all, and now——"

She stole a quick look at him as he paused. He caught her glance in the dim light, and held it a moment with eyes that shone with all the old steady adoration, the old untarnished faith. And then he turned away from her wearily.

"You know," he said, under his breath, "I am not going to waste words when they are nothing to you. Let me go on serving you—being your friend, your bull-dog, as you put it. What you let me be, I will be thankfully. Leave it so, Rose. Come—let us walk on; it is growing late."

But she did not stir. She stood now with her chin resting upon her hand, looking upward towards the Bee-Barn. In the rectangle of yellow light formed by the door, a tall figure appeared, tarried a while, then passed again from view. Far to one side of the grey slope crowded with its vague white blotches of hives, the glow

of the furnace-house cheered the night, and a cracked, wavering voice could be heard gaily trolling forth a martial ditty. Rose Petherway slid her hand along the bar of the gate until it lightly touched that of the man beside her.

"Stephen, do you understand what—what I am now? Do you realise that I am a broken-hearted woman, one who has had all her first emotions chilled and killed, one who has lost for ever all the things for which she would once have bartered away soul and body?—a woman stunned by life, and seeing no hope that life can ever again hold a spark of true joy, or comfort, or contentment for her?

He was long in answering, but then he answered her breathlessly.

"Yes, I know it all. I have long known it."

"And now—another thing. I am going to tell you what no other soul in the world knows, or even dreams of; but it is something that my father and mother must be told sooner or later, and then I dread the shock it must bring them. Stephen, they and all here think I am a woman with a comfortable fortune of my own. But that is no longer true; or, at least, it will not be true in a few weeks' time, when I have done what I have set my mind on. Poor Tom and I have been spending money like water all this year, and we are both heavily in debt as well—how heavily I did not guess until I came to count up for us both. And there is only one thing to do. Tom himself can do nothing. He has run through everything he had—he will never get well again, I know—soon he must die, and die in the disgrace of debt, unless I can prevent it. Stephen, I can just do it, and no more. When I have realised all I possess, and have paid off all we owe, I shall be an utterly penniless woman."

She was still looking straight before her up the grey

hillside. His hand had closed over hers, but she seemed not to know it. Now she turned full upon him, all the old rich clarion back again in her voice.

"Reckon me all up, Stephen!" she cried warningly. "Penniless, broken in heart, broken in honour, saved from crime only by the mercy of chance, soured and sickened with life—hopeless, worthless and poor—is that the sort of woman for a true, noble man to link up his life with? Think, think, Stephen Brent!"

He took both her hands in his and kissed their palms. And then his curly head went up and back with that peremptory, confident air, which Rose, because she had secretly admired, had most derided. Now the starlight drew the same sparkle from his eyes as from hers.

"Rose!" he cried, "I take the chances, and take them gladly! So that you will let me love you—be by your side to guard and serve you—I will never ask for more. My own love is enough. Gladly, gratefully, I take them, and without fear!"

"And I—I will be a faithful wife to you, Stephen, so long as I live," she said, and kissed him on the lips.

Later, as they wandered together towards the farm, Stephen felt her shiver a little in his arms. The same thought rose to the lips of each almost simultaneously.

"But you will take me away from this place," she entreated. "I—I could not bear to——"

"And that is the very thing I was thinking about, Rosie," he broke in upon her. "I am as well again now as ever I was in my life, and it is high time I got back to work. My old ship, the *Mesopotamia*, sails next month. They expect me to sign on again with her. But I have got a better scheme. Yesterday's post brought me the news that the Company is establishing a new station out in China, and they will want a resident medical-officer for it, at a thumping good salary. I am pretty sure to get

the berth, if I apply at once ; and then, when the old ship sails for the East, she can carry us both out together."

He laughed his old hearty, deep-chested laugh.

" But that," he added gaily, " will mean getting married within the next three weeks ! "

Again, at her sick lord's behest, Elisabel had come out under the vine-leaves of the balcony, to stand and gaze at the star-strewn autumn sky. In her hand she held a little planisphere of the heaven ; and keeping this just within the light from the lamp, she alternately studied it and noted the points of silver quivering amidst the tree-fringed southern hills. And this time she returned to Claud's bedside with laughing, triumphant eyes.

" Yes ! 'tis up at last, bee-master ! " she cried, " all water-white and water-bright, and shivering and shaking ! And now will you keep your promise, and go to sleep ?—now that you have got your precious old Honey-Star back again ! "

" Is it quite white, bee-mistress ? Not a trace of red or dinginess about it ? Go and take another look. And then we will see about promises."

She passed to the door again ; came back to his side.

" Quite white—white as snow."

" Good ! " he said, nestling into his pillow like a tired child. " The bees are in for a lucky wintering, and the bee-folk with them. And now for the promises, Elisabel —yours first ! Here is the General, coming to sit the night with me. So off you go to your bed, my dearie, as you promised. Gracious ! what a white, weary face ! —there is nothing lucky about that ! Now—bee-mistress mine !—be gone ! "

She bent to his reaching arms, kissed him on cheeks and brow and lips, and leaving that cross of kisses to guard him, climbed to her bed in the little crow's-nest room.

CHAPTER XXVII

LEAVES FROM LUCY'S DIARY

NOVEMBER 14TH, 18—.—Not one line written for over a month, and yet there has been so much to chronicle. But it was always that way with my diary-keeping. Looking back through the old chintz-covered book, I can find many such gaps, and it is just those which bring back most to the memory. They have always been times when events have kept me too busy, or left me too sorry, to write; and so it has been in this case.

I am sorry and sad enough now, in very truth, though I have at last sat down in the great chair by the sunny window, with my book on my knee. Yesterday was Friday—Black Friday it will always remain in my memory, I am afraid; for it was the day on which the old *Mesopotamia* left the docks in London, carrying away my dearest brother and his new-made bride. We went to see them off—Mr. and Mrs. Petherway and I—and how happy they looked, in spite of the pain of parting!—how they waved to us, and how we waved back to them!—until the black old ship swung clear of the dock-gates, and began to churn up the brown waters of the river beyond into yeasty foam. They were gone at last, and then my handkerchief was put to another purpose. I am ashamed to write it, but this is a book of truths,

unpleasant as well as pleasant. I think I cried, in my heart at least, all the lonely journey home.

It was very lonely in the train from London, for all Mr. and Mrs. Petherway's kindness and attempts at company. The farmer could think of no other means of cheering me up but macaroons, and Mrs. Petherway talked unceasingly for my comfort. The chief refrain of her conversation was the very desirable match, from a worldly point of view, which Stephen had made. "Whatever happens, my dear," she kept on saying, "they never need starve. An excellent man—oh! one of the most excellent! But he is only a ship's doctor, and a poor one at that. And very few are so lucky nowadays as to wed fortune as well as beauty. Darling Rose's income will be quite equal to his, I greatly fear, for many a long year to come." Poor dear Mrs. Petherway! what a bombshell I could have let fall into the midst of her innocently purse-proud complacency! But she need never know now.

They brought me from Stavisham in their carriage, and dropped me in the darkness at my gate. I let myself into the silent house, groped for the candle and lighted it. Father had gone to bed, leaving a note that the cat was out. Stephen's portrait smiled down on me from the wall, and though I cried again at sight of it, some of the lonely, forsaken feeling went away. To-day I got up early to finish the house-work before breakfast, so that I could have the clear morning to write up my long-neglected journal. Thank goodness! there is no school on Saturdays.

The last entry I made was an unfinished one. Stephen and I were sitting after supper, he silently smoking and I with the old book under the lamp. I had just written the date, and these words: "All safely home at the Bee-Barn again, and settled down comfortably to their

beautiful life together——" There it broke off, for the poor General came banging and raving at the door with the news of Claud's hurt, and the next minute we were all three hurrying up the street, our minds filled with, I know not what terrible fears.

* * * * * *

"Well, it has all ended happily—all; at least, from some one's point of view or other. But what wild speculations we indulged in, Claud most of all, as to the identity of his assailant, for those two days after Elisabel's return, until George Lindup appeared at the Bee-Barn, and the mystery was made clear! I was helping Elisabel to wash up the dinner things. The place rang with the clatter of our work and our talk, and Elisabel's singing: she could not keep from singing at that time for more than a few minutes at a stretch. And then something made us glance round to the door together, and all the merry noise stopped short. It was poor George, looking broken and haggard and older by ten years, so that we hardly knew him. He spoke scarce above a whisper. "I have got his letter. And can I speak to him, 'Lisbel?" said he. "His letter, George?" cried out Elisabel, and took a long, strange, frightened look at him. Claud called out quickly from his bed in the corner: "Come in, George! I have been expecting you about those faggots for days back. Come over here and talk to me!" But it was no good trying to deceive Elisabel.

George Lindup had gone to the bedside and, without a word, had fallen on his knees there, and begun to cry like a child. Elisabel came softly up behind him, and stood looking at Claud over George's bowed head. "Then that is where the General went all that long time yesterday!" said Elisabel, breathing hard. Claud had taken George's hand between both his own. "He's a very old

friend of mine, dearie!" he said, looking at Elisabel appealingly. But she would have it out of him. "So you knew all the time who it was had struck you?" cried she. "And you sent the General to——" She stopped, glancing from one to the other for a moment, and then she took George's other hand.

That was altogether too much for George Lindup. He burst out sobbing harder than ever, but could still say not a word. And presently off he went and out of the door in the same speechless condition, yet obviously much comforted. I stood and watched him go down through the bee-farm, with bent shoulders and eyes on the ground. In the lane below he was joined by someone in a curtain-bonnet. I did not guess who it was until I saw the pair of them take the footpath up towards High Barn, where the Brimbles live. The old shepherd is down with his rheumatism again, and Nellie is home nursing him for a while. The old man was always very fond of George.

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January 7th.—Christmas has passed, and the new year is on us. Of late I have been going down to the farm a good deal to sit with Mrs. Petherway, and try to cheer her up a little in her great trouble. Two lonely, sorrowful people can often do that for each other. I think both she and the farmer are bearing up at last; but the death of their only son, so soon after the loss of their only daughter—for it was a real loss to the old folk, Rose's going—has made their lives very dark and difficult. May God in His mercy give them comfort, as He alone knows how to give!

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January 23rd.—Mr. Jenyns called this evening with the *Stavisham Weekly Chronicle* for father. There was a paragraph in it, quoted from a London newspaper,

which will interest a few people here, who remember the man concerned. It is not often we get something fresh to talk about in Whinbury. I cut the paragraph out and paste it in here :

"At the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, Arthur Wilkes, *alias* Arthur Speed, *alias* Courtenay Roper, a turf commission-agent, was charged on several warrants with obtaining money by false pretences from various people. The accused represented himself to be a retired military officer, and thus obtained access to society in certain country districts, where he was able to carry on his ingenious methods of fraud. A long list of previous convictions having been proved against him, prisoner was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. The Judge remarked that it was one of the worst cases of systematic fraud that had ever come before him. Such heartless scoundrels as the prisoner were a blot on civilisation, and he had much satisfaction in imposing the maximum penalty."

* * * * * *

February 1st.—February here at last, and the world beginning to grow green again underfoot, and the catkins coming in the hazels, and the tops of the elm-trees getting misty with their first purple bloom. What a wonderful thing Time is!—I mean how, by its mere passage, it softens sorrows, heals wounds, smooths away difficulties that once looked insurmountable. I came down into the garden early this morning, to look at Stephen's crocuses, all flaming along the footway; and thought of him dibbing them in just before he went—for remembrance, he said—as if I could ever forget him! Still, the sight of my name and his, alive and growing—the two names glowing in beautiful colour on the bare earth, side

by side—did come to me like a thought of his only that moment expressed.

Time—yes, it is a wonderful thing. Looking about me at the budding bushes, and the sun pouring over the hill-top, and listening to the thrushes singing, I said to myself that I was as near happy again as any solitary humdrum old maid could expect to be. It is only a few months ago, but if you went to the bee-farm now, you would never guess that there had ever been any trouble there. Claud and the General hard at work among the hives, both looking as brown and happy as bees; and Elisabel sitting in a sunny corner close by them, stitching away at various small articles, for which this wonderful magician, Time, is soon to find a wearer. She is not allowed to work on the bee-farm now, or to do more than trifle about in the house. Claud would thread her very needle for her, if she would let him. He would soon spoil any woman of less strength of character, I should think. Perhaps his chiefest blessing is that he has not mated with one of the diffident, colourless, clinging sort; as much a blessing for such an one, no doubt, as for him. These things are not left to chance. I believe you come to be thankful for everything that has happened in your life, sweet or bitter, hard or soft, in the end.

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February 21st.—The China mail in at last, and what a budget of good tidings! I sat down to gloat over the letters, reading in comfort now that I have my new spectacles. I wear them always now, in public as well as private. Is the shedding of small vanities real spiritual progress, I wonder?—or is it merely a rubbing-down affair, of no merit to speak of, a sort of natural fall of the sere and yellow leaves? I am fast getting rid of all mine, whichever way it is.

First, Stephen's letter:—full of tenderness, of delight at his new work and surroundings, and of enthusiastic praise for Rose. They have already settled down into an old married couple, my dearest brother writes; and Rose is apparently developing the most unexpected domestic qualities. She has already taken over the money-bags, and is going to make all her own gowns, and is quite dangerous to approach—Stephen says—on account of scissors, knitting-needles, and things. He hazards the guess that this will surprise me, and he is not far out. Still, I know what a good man can make of any woman, so that he loves her, and believes in her enough. Love can do a great deal more than make the world go round: it can turn dross into gold, cleanse hearts and minds, and make silk purses out of all sorts of unlikely materials, in spite of the old proverb. Stephen is not far wrong in trusting to love.

Rose's letter, now,—I have read it again and again, and the more I read it, the more I am puzzled, pleased, and—to tell the truth—ashamed of myself. "At least," she writes at the end of her long epistle, "we start fair and square and above-board. I have no secrets from him—I have told him all my thoughts and everything, good or bad, that has ever happened in my life. He knows me through and through, and is at the end of all possible shocks and disappointments. Rose Petherway, that crumbling, unsafe old ruin, is down—razed to the ground, and all the rubble of her cleared away; and there is safe flat soil to build upon again. Darling Lucy, I am going to build up a real true house of life this time. I have dug the foundations already—dug them deep—and they are made of the good stuff called Gratitude. That is solid enough to bear anything, and who shall say what it may not some day bear? Be patient with me, wish me well, do not expect too much to begin with, and—well, you

shall see in time. Stephen—he is the perfect human man. Whenever I think of him, my eyes prick and smart. They are doing that now. I am going to build such a house!"

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March 17th.—The birthday of Melissa!—Melissa Elisabel Lucy Laughton, the little rosy spark of life is to be called. So there is to be a Lucy Laughton after all in Whinbury! I must write and tell Stephen that his prophecy about the name, made so many years ago, has come true at last. He will laugh at that, I know; and I can laugh with him, sincerely. I practise laughing now, every day.

How glad I am about it all, and what an orgy of subdued rejoicing at the Bee-Barn I have just escaped from! Claud and I and the General wandering up and down the garden, mute and anxious as mice, the very sunbeams strung taut with the suspense of waiting for news from the house, whence we had been all temporarily banished. Then old Mrs. March's November-sun-like visage smiling in the doorway, and our combined scrambling rush at her. And then the little cloud amid the sunshine on Claud's face, and his half-comic, half-rueful exclamation: "Not a girl, really, mother? Haven't you made a mistake? You see we can't call it after the Honey-Star now—Sirius is a masculine name!" But he soon got the better of this little pleasantry of Providence at his expense, and fixed on Melissa as the most auspicious name for the new bee-woman of Whinbury. Melissa, it seems, is the presiding Goddess of Apiculture. She was a beautiful Princess of Crete in ancient mythological times, whom the god Jupiter changed into a bee—the first bee that ever went honey-gathering.

There was a flagon of poor Caleb March's old mead to be broached after that. Claud and Mrs. March and the General were used to it; but it made the Stavisham

doctor wink, though he stuck to it manfully; and I, for my part, succeeded in making a fair show of tasting it. To-night, Claud told us all, he and the General were going to bury in the garden somewhere a great stone jar of his own brew, which will be dug up long years hence and drunk at Melissa's wedding. Perhaps by that time the head of her godmother will be better seasoned.

I came away then. The last I heard was a little comfortable crooning sound somewhere high up among the rafters of the Bee-Barn, and the last I saw of Claud was the soles of his stockinged feet, as he crept up the ladder-stair to investigate the source of the new melody. Home seemed brighter than ever when I got back here. I am taking to Elisabel's trick of singing at work, rather too juvenile a habit, I fear, for an old maid nearly forty; but it makes a kind of company about the place, now that father keeps so much to his bed.

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September 13th.—How the time flies! Autumn come round again, and with it another Whinbury wedding.

Not that the wedding was a surprise to me. Perhaps the sweetest thing in the life of a village school-mistress is the way in which her old pupils, the girls, at least, keep up their friendship with her in after years; and Nellie Brimble, like all the rest, has of late entrusted me with many confidences.

Still, I was as little prepared as any for the astonishing thing about the old shepherd. To die, and leave all that money stowed away in all sorts of corners and in the queerest receptacles—old stockings, sewn lambskins, tobacco-jars, and what-not! And then Nellie to go off straight with it to George Lindup, and implore him to take it as a gift, to pay off the load of debt which he had inherited from his father!

It is one of those acts of sheer goodness, which must not be criticised because of the inevitable sequel of achieved heart's desire to the performer. Of course, everyone but George himself had known how it was with Nellie. But he seems to have woke up wonderfully to the fact of her kindness for him at last, and to have done the right thing promptly and willingly enough—take the giver, as well as the gift. I love the pair of them, and Nellie none the less for the touch of simple astuteness in her composition. I threw the rice and confetti after them with all the pleasure in life. What a lot of these I have thrown in the last year or so! Happy Elisabel—grateful Rose—triumphant Nellie!—how I pelted you, each in turn, with a good wish for every grain of rice and every paper spangle! I wonder how it feels to come under that joyous shower?

THE END